COMRADES of the TRAILS

G. E. THEODORE ROBERTS

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Comrades of the Trails

WORKS OF

G. E. THEODORE ROBERTS

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for

Donald

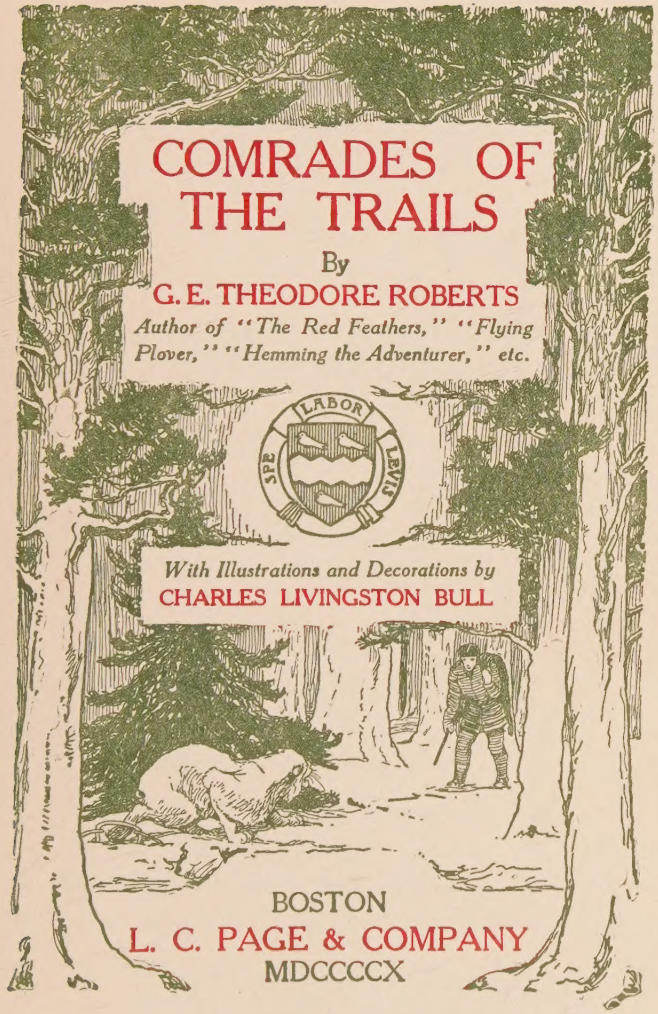
with love from

Aunt Emmie

Xmas 1912

" HE TRIED TO RECALL TO HIS MIND ALL THAT HE HAD EVER READ ABOUT THE BEARS OF THIS COUNTRY."

(See page 44)



COMRADES OF THE TRAILS

By

G. E. THEODORE ROBERTS

Author of "The Red Feathers," "Flying Plover," "Hemming the Adventurer," etc.

With Illustrations and Decorations by

CHARLES LIVINGSTON BULL

BOSTON

L. C. PAGE & COMPANY

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COMRADES OF THE TRAILS

CHAPTER I

REALIZING HIS DREAMS

From far away the voice came and whispered in my ear.
I heard the wind in the spruces and the rapids shouting clear.
I saw the smoke of the little fires stream up to greet the day;
So I packed my kit and followed the voice North and West and away.

At last Dick Ramsey stood on the very edge of the land of his dreams and ambitions. Beyond lay forests of spruce and pine that even the axes of adventurous lumbermen had not taken toll of, and rivers that were but suspicions to the map-makers, and wide barrens across which the hoofs of the caribou herds had worn knee-deep trails in the brown loam.

Dick Ramsey stood at the end of the last man-made road — at the "jumping-off place" as Billy Blunt called it. To reach this spot Dick

had made a long and varied journey. First, in the snug and speedy railway carriages of Home he had raced across England to Liverpool. From there, in a great Canadian liner, he had crossed the Atlantic and steamed up the St. Lawrence River to Quebec. From that old new-world city on its historic crag he had approached the unknown land of his dreams by means of three railways. The first of these railways had inspired his admiration; the second had reminded him of his ocean voyage; the third had filled him with dismay, so violently had the little engine and the clattering carriage lurched and pitched and swayed along the risky road-bed. By these means he had come at last to Wolf's Landing. At this little lumber village on Wolf's River he had spent two weeks, gathering information, completing his outfit and arranging for the final stages of his great adventure. From Wolf's Landing a French-Canadian named Peter Lavois had transported Dick and his kit, in a farm-wagon, thirty miles across country, along something that Peter called a road but that the young Englishman had no name for, to McDodd's Camp on the Little Beaver. At McDodd's Camp Billy Blunt had taken him in charge. Billy belonged to the lumber camp and was a teamster of

great and hard-won reputation in those parts. At this season of the year — early October — it was his work to haul provisions in to the different branch camps; and as the ways along which duty called him were not fit for even the strongest wheels, being composed of a terrible mixture of roots, stumps, mud-holes and boulders, he did his hauling on a low sled. So on this sled he had piled Dick Ramsey's outfit and fastened it down with several hundreds of feet of rope. To the sled he had hitched his team of two rough-coated, wise, powerful horses — and then they had started for the "jumping-off place."

Now, standing at the end of the last man-made road, with his face toward the vast wilds in which he was about to seek his fortune, Dick Ramsey remembered that journey with wonder. Though it was called twenty-five miles they had toiled and floundered for two whole days to accomplish it. As Billy Blunt had said: "Oh, yes! Twenty-five mile all right — *along!* — an' fifty mile *up and down!*"

Now that it was behind him, Dick began to see the funny side of it. During the journey he had seen only the under-side of mud and water and the top-side of stumps, rocks and roots. He was

caked with black mud to his arm-pits. He was spattered with it to the crown of his soft felt hat. His hands were begrimed and scratched, from numerous tumbles, and his high-topped moccasins were full of clay and water. He looked at the horses, now quietly eating their oats, and saw that they, too, were coated with the black mud through which they had plunged so valiantly.

On Dick's right, as he faced the further and untested trails of the wilderness, stood a deserted shack that had been built, ten years ago, by a half-breed trapper. Behind the shack arose a high hill, its sides clothed with towering spruces, rank on rank. On his left a steep bank sloped down to the narrow, brawling waters of Little Beaver. Beyond the river the land rose steeply again, with thick, gloomy forests of pine and spruce on its strong shoulders. Before the shack squatted Billy Blunt, busily engaged in frying bacon at a little fire. Westward, the sun was dipping its lower rim behind the crests of the far hills and flooding the dusky spires of the forest with crimson.

"Well," murmured Dick, cheerfully, as he scraped a hand-full of half-dry mud off the front of his short blanket "jumper," "this is even

finer than I expected. What wouldn't the fellows at home give for a day's fun over that thing they call a ' haulin' road ' in this country?"

He stepped over to the fire and sat down beside Billy Blunt. His interest in frying-pan and tea-kettle was keen.

" Guess I'll stop right here to-night," said Billy, " an' light out fer home on the back trail at sun-up. Sober Sam 'll be here by then, I reckon." He glanced up from the frying bacon and met the young Englishman's eyes. " I guess you'll do, young feller," he continued. " You be sound, anyhow, wind, limb an' temper. Thunder an' turf! it was as good as a show to see you in them bog-holes — an' as polite as an Injun all the time. Many's the greenhorn I've seen who would be back along the trail still, a-cussin' them holes."

Dick grinned. He was highly pleased by the woodsman's praise.

" I'm afraid I would not be of much use in this country if I lost my temper every time I came to a bad place in the trail," he said.

" That's right," returned Blunt. " Cussin' never yet put a bottom to a bog, or resined a canoe. Injuns know that — an' their grandfathers knowed it afore them — an' so they keep their

mouths shut no matter how tearin' mad they feel. I knowed an Injun once, brother to this here Sober Sam, who got afloat on a pan of ice one spring-time on Wolf's River. He floated down stream for three days afore the chance came for him to get ashore. He hadn't anything to eat, neither, for his whole outfit — toboggan, grub, traps an' pelts — had all gone through the ice. Well, I was handy when he come ashore. Did he cuss an' tear? Not him. 'Dat almighty heap cold v'yage, Billy,' said he. Ay, them was his identical words."

"Good for him!" exclaimed Dick Ramsey, heartily. "Is Sober Sam as sound in the temper as his brother?"

"Don't worry about Sober Sam," returned the lumber-jack. "I've given you my word for him, an' I've told him to meet you here at this shack. So don't you worry, young feller. I like you — an' so I am treatin' you white. Sober Sam's a good Injun, an' just the lad to larn you the tricks o' this here forsaken country. You keep your temper, an' that smoky faced old son of the woods 'll keep his. You treat him square an' he'll do the right thing by you if it takes the hide offen him to do it. Treat him like a friend — the way

you treat me — an' he'll treat you like you was his brother an' his father an' his son all rolled together. Injuns an' breeds is just the same as us white men — some's good an' some's bad. A good Injun's as good as any white man that ever pulled on a pair o' moccasins. A bad Injun! Well, when you cross the trail o' a bad one you just keep your eye peeled — an' take that from Billy Blunt."

After the simple meal of bread, bacon and tea was eaten, Blunt spent ten minutes in scraping the biggest lumps of mud off his horses. Then he put their blankets on and stabled them in the shack. By this time the stars were all aglint and the air had a tang of frost in it. The voice of the Little Beaver boomed up from its rocky valley. A fox barked, far up on the black hill-side. An owl hooted dismally among the high tops of the forest.

Blunt enlarged the fire, heaping wood upon it until it blazed high, sent showers of red sparks aloft and weaved a wide circle of dancing light around the campers. They talked, and the woodsman smoked his pipe. Soon the talk slackened, and grew softer and slower. At last Dick removed his outer garments and crawled into his

thick blanket-lined sleeping-bag. In a minute his eyes were closed and the magic radiance of the camp-fire was weaving magic dreams in his brain.

And now, while Dick Ramsey sleeps the sleep of youth and hope and honest fatigue, with the roaring of a rock-torn river for his slumber song, on the very threshold of the wild country of his ambitions, let me go back and explain the reason of it all.

Richard Ramsey was the second son and third child of the late Major Henry Clinton Ramsey of Foxholm, in Dorset. The major had died just a year before the opening of this story and only a few weeks after Richard had left school. Dick's elder brother was in the Indian Army, and by hard work and a natural knack for soldiering had already made a name for himself by the time of his father's death. The girl, who was four years older than Dick, was married to a young London barrister who was also heir to a very fine property near Foxholm. It was well that two of the three children at least were so comfortably provided for, for after the major's death his affairs were found to be in a bad way. He had retired from the service of his country at too early an age, complaining that there would never be any more

fighting and that he was weary of fiddling away his time in garrison towns. So he resigned his commission and began to teach his tenants, by example, the modern methods of agriculture. The lessons amused the worthy farmers but cost the instructor much money. One of the tenants remarked at the time — "Squire'll soon larn as turnips baint sodgers." Time hung heavily on the major's hands; so, when he had called a halt on his agricultural activities, he turned his attentions to the stock market. Enough said! He was a soldier, not a broker. Living, he hid his scars even from his wife; but he could not hide them after he was dead.

Foxholm was sold. Everything else that was worth anything was sold also — horses and carriages, books and pictures, sheep, horned cattle and farm machinery. Debts were paid, and there was enough left for the widow to live on, very quietly. There was nothing left for poor Richard.

Now Dick had been an out-door boy since the time of his earliest memories, loving the woods and the fields and the life thereof. It had always been his ambition to become an explorer some day. This worthy ambition had shaped his reading and tinted all his thoughts. He would enter and mas-

ter the secrets of the wild and unknown places of the earth, north and south, east and west, pitting his endurance and wit against the quiet, cloaked but gigantic forces of nature. He would prove himself a foeman worthy of her steel — and then she would accept him as a friend. He would write books about these strange lands and the people and birds and beasts that inhabited them. It was a boy's ambition; but it was also a manly and honest one. Most healthy boys dream of something of the kind at one time or another; but in Dick Ramsey it was more than a romantic dream. It was a part of his life, woven into his brain and his heart.

Dick and his father had been comrades — so it was not until several months after the major's death that Dick looked again at his plans for the future through the new light of his altered conditions. But he looked, at last, and his heart did not turn from the old ambitions. Then people began to ask him what he intended to do. Dick did not commit himself to these idle questioners, but told all his hopes and secrets to his mother. Then it was that the brother-in-law in London offered him a clerical position in his own office. Dick thought of the gloomy office, of the high stools and

scratching pens, of the clanging streets on all sides. He thought of these things and felt as if his heart had turned to water. "It is very kind of you, Jack," he said, "but — but I'll ship before the mast on some rusty old tramp rather than begin my life perched up on one of those beastly stools." So that was the end of that. Many hard things were said about poor Dick; but neither the mother nor the brother in India said a word — just then.

Dick was for breaking away at once; but his mother asked him to wait a little longer. By this time Mrs. Ramsey was established in a small house in a London suburb, within easy reach of her daughter. About three weeks after Dick had refused the stool in his brother-in-law's office, and when he was growing fairly desperate with impatience and wounded pride, his mother entered his bedroom early one morning, before he was up. A letter that she had been watching for had arrived by the first post. But she had two letters in her hand. She kissed him tenderly and then sat down on the edge of his bed. She was smiling — but there were tears in her eyes.

"Here are two letters that will interest you," she said. "Harry's came several days ago; but

I kept it until I heard from your Aunt Madge."

Dick read the letter from India first. This is the part of it that most nearly concerned him. "I feel as you do about Dick. He is no more suited to office-work than I am, and it would be a crime to force him into it. I think Canada is the place for him to make his start. There is room enough there for a thousand explorers — and chances for a young fellow with a level head on his shoulders to combine exploration with bread-winning. He might do something at trapping, to begin with — if he had enough money to buy an outfit and pay his way into the country. I hope Aunt Madge will lend him a helping hand. Good luck to him — and here are thirty-five pounds that I have managed to scrape together. If he gets his chance I know he will make his way in his chosen profession."

Dick dared not trust his voice, so turned in silence from his brother's letter to his aunt's. Of hers it is enough to say that she enclosed a draft for two hundred pounds and wrote that she believed firmly in Dick and his dreams. That is how Richard Ramsey got his chance to win his spurs.

Dick set out for the new world with a clear brain but a heart benumbed with the struggle between the joy and wonder at his great chance and grief at parting with his mother.

Dick did not buy his outfit in London, for he suspected that he should know better what he needed when nearer the scene of action. He took with him only such clothing as he thought would be useful and his shot-gun. This last was a serviceable weapon, by a good maker, light, perfectly balanced and a hard hitter. He felt safe in taking this, for he knew that there are no better fowling-pieces in the wide world than those that are made by English gunsmiths and used by English sportsmen. In the city of Quebec he began to buy his outfit, with great caution. The manager of the bank at which he deposited his money befriended him here. Together they went from shop to shop (or from store to store, as they say there), pricing and selecting. At Wolf's Landing he completed his purchases. Arrived at the end of the last man-made road, the following articles were in his possession.

A rough list of Richard Ramsey's outfit for his first winter in the northern wilderness: — A shot-gun (number twelve, hammerless). A rifle

(medium-weight, repeating). A medicine chest, containing quinine, bandages and liniments. A small camera and films. A compass. A full-weight axe, a belt-axe and sheath-knives. A frying-pan, kettle, tin mugs and tin plates. One hundred rounds of ammunition for the rifle and half as many more for the shot-gun. Two blankets and a sleeping-bag. Half a dozen pairs of oil-tanned moccasins — three pairs with high tops and three without tops. A dozen pairs of woollen socks and stockings, woollen gloves and mittens. Heavy outer and under clothing. A soft felt hat and a fur cap. One pair of snow-shoes (these he could renew in the woods, for every Indian is able to make them). A canister of plug-tobacco, for "trade." Tea, sugar and molasses in water-tight tins. Flour, corn-meal, pea-meal and rice in small canvas bags. Prunes, currants and evaporated apples. Beans (for baking), salt pork, bacon, and matches, salt and pepper in tins. Rope. A complete sewing-bag. A dozen steel traps for mink, otter, fox and ermine.

And now to return to Dick himself, and Billy Blunt, and the camp at the edge of the trackless wilderness. Thrice, during the night, Blunt sat up in his blankets, tossed more wood on the

fire and sank back again into the dreamless slumber from which the requirements of the fire had only half aroused him. Dick, snug in his sleeping-bag and with his feet to the fire, did not so much as change his position until he awoke at dawn. During those still hours the furtive, wide-eyed life of the wild drew close around the fire. Brown hares, not yet changed into their winter coats of white, hopped from the underbrush into the narrowing circle of red light, sat up on their haunches to listen and look, and then bounced over the bodies of the sleepers and vanished among the shadows. A big dog fox came down to the edge of the camping-place, stood motionless as a stone for several minutes while he sniffed the man-scent and thought matters over, then slipped into the darkness again and continued his silent journey on the trail of the flighty hares. There was no wind, and a caribou passed the camp through the heavy timber of the hillside without a sight or a scent of it. A porcupine, who had watched the arrival of the men and horses from his perch in the fork of a big poplar tree, now backed down to the ground and lumbered into the little clearing before the shack. He moved slowly but without caution, and his quills

rustled as he advanced. He was covered with long quills and long, coarse hairs, from the tip of his tail to his eye-brows; but his undersides were unprotected. His sight and hearing were good, however, and he could curl himself into a ball and present nothing but quills to his enemies at a moment's notice. He waddled up to the fire and took a good look at it, examined the sleeping men with interest, sniffed at a bacon rind and decided that it was not fit to eat, and then entered the shack to look at the horses. A black bear scrambled up from the river, stared at the fire for a minute or two, and then went down the bank again.

At last the high stars began to fade.

CHAPTER II

SOBER SAM AND HIS CANOE

Dick awoke in the grey of the dawn. The fire had fallen and cooled to grey ashes and black cores of wood with here and there a coal still ablink like a red eye. On all sides arose the still, black forests, quiet now and in the half-light blurred into mysterious masses. It seemed as if the whole wilderness, save the Little Beaver, still lay wrapt in sleep.

Dick raised himself on his elbow and looked about him. At the same moment Blunt sat bolt upright, tossed his blankets aside and rubbed open his eyes with his knuckles all in one second. Then he got to his feet, strode to the fire, squatted over it and with swift fingers gathered together a heart of red coals from the dead ashes. With a strip of bark, a few dry twigs and the charred ends of faggots he topped the live coals. Stooping low, he blew softly — and up shot the yellow flame.

"I overslep' meself," he said, turning to Dick.

"But I'll be on the back trail pretty soon, for all that."

With a tin pail in each hand he started down the steep and brush-tangled bank toward the brawling river, for water for his horses. Dick got out of his sleeping-bag, possessed himself of a towel and a cake of soap and the empty tea-kettle, and followed Blunt. A trace — a mere ghost — of the half-breed's path still showed, twisting downward between the spruces and firs. Dick footed it cautiously, easing himself down by the elastic branches of the trees and keeping the path by the sense of feeling rather than of sight. Before he reached the river he met Blunt returning, scrambling upward with his pails abrim.

At the edge of the racing, clashing waters, the young Englishman felt something of the awe of the vast wilderness — something that almost amounted to a quiet terror. He stood motionless at the edge of the black current, hearkening to the uproar at his feet with senses painfully alert. There seemed to be a hundred voices commingled in the giant voice of Little Beaver — sobbing and shouting, cries high and low, harsh roarings and gentle pleadings. It is a terrific sound at first, this outcry of rapids strong with the autumn

rains; but in time one learns to love it and hear no voice of menace in it.

White mist veiled the torn bosom of the river, swaying and drifting, lifting and sinking in long, frail wisps with the commotion beneath. Steadily and swiftly the sky brightened above the shaggy valley and the mist thinned and vanished from the water. Dick Ramsey smiled, at last, at his own timidity. The air was decidedly crisp; but he stripped and stepped cautiously into the shallow water. Wow! but it was cold. Standing scarcely ankle-deep, and afraid to move his feet an inch for dread of the deep and raging current, he splashed himself all over and, without waiting to make use of the soap, skipped ashore and applied the towel to his glowing skin. He dressed like lightning, filled the kettle with water for the morning tea, and then scrambled up the bank. He felt wonderfully fresh and strong. Beside the fire he found Billy Blunt frying bacon and grinning.

"I seen you," said Blunt. "If I hadn't, by ginger I'd never believe it. Well, it do beat the Dutch, for sure! Dang my eyes!"

"What is the trouble?" asked Dick.

"You must be all-fired dirty, youngster, to

take a wash in Little Beaver on a mornin' like this," said Blunt.

"It freshens a fellow — wakes him up," replied Dick.

"Oh! this be a free country," returned the woodsman. "But for me, I'd a long shot sooner stay asleep nor wake meself up that a-way. But every man to his own special brand o' foolishness, say I — so long as it don't hurt other folks. I'd give a dollar for a sight o' Sober Sam first time he sees you up to that trick. Thunder an' turf! he'll think you be tryin' to commit susanside, sure. He gets all the washin' he wants when he falls in, by accident — an' he ain't done that more'n once in his whole life, I reckon."

Dick laughed good-naturedly and helped himself to bacon and bread. He knew, instinctively, that the woodsman meant no offence by his remarks about the morning bath. Dick had taken some trouble, since leaving the city of Quebec, to learn the nature of a backwoods joke, for he knew that his success largely depended on his ability to keep on friendly terms with the rough fellows who have their work and being in and about the fringes of the great wilderness.

The sun was in sight, bright as fire but colourless

as glass, by the time the two had finished their breakfast. The sky was pale blue and without a single cloud. Billy Blunt led the horses from the shack, preparatory to his departure along the back trail. Dick remained seated by the fire, gazing around at the wealth of dark green forests that hemmed him in. Suddenly, a strange figure appeared at the top of the bank — a squat figure with bowed legs, clothed in shapeless garments of no particular colour, and gripping a long, white, spruce pole in one hand.

" Howdy, brother," said the stranger, without removing his short, powerful-looking pipe from his mouth. Dick was too greatly astonished by the stranger's sudden and remarkable appearance to answer; but Blunt turned at the sound of the voice and hurried forward. " Howdy, Sober Sam," he cried. " Thought you'd turn up afore long. How's tricks, old boy? "

Sober Sam removed his pipe from his mouth and grinned broadly. " Good! Heap good," said he. " Plenty water in Little Beaver, yes. Too much, maybe. Dat a'right."

He and Billy shook hands like old and valued friends. Then Billy turned to Dick. " Here's the youngster I sent you word about," he said.

"He's good friend o' mine, an' wants to get on good fur-country. He wants you to larn him the tricks o' the trade an' work along with him. He'll treat you right, Sam. What d'you say?"

"Dat a'right," replied the swarthy redskin, looking at the young Englishman with bright but kindly black eyes. "What you call him?"

"Dick Ramsey," replied Richard, smiling.

"Dat a'right. Heap fine name, yes. What you pay, Dick?"

"I want to pay what is fair," replied Dick; "but, mind you, I am in here on business and not just for fun. Suppose the three of us talk it over, while you have something to eat, Sam."

Sober Sam ate very fast and talked very slowly; but in half an hour the business was arranged to every one's satisfaction. Billy Blunt did most of the talking and, though he had no stake in the expedition, explained Dick's case to Sober Sam in a masterly manner. So, without any sign of haggling on either side, a fair agreement was come to between Richard Ramsey and Sober Sam. No papers were signed; but the two shook hands, looking squarely into each other's eyes. "It suits me," said the Englishman, "and I feel sure that we shall get along splendidly together."

" Dat a'right, Dick, you bet. Me a'mighty good man at de fur-takin'," returned Sober Sam.

Ten minutes later, Billy Blunt hitched his team to the sled, bade good-bye to his old friend and his new, and started courageously back toward the stumps and mud-holes of yesterday.

Sober Sam drained the last drop of tea out of the tin kettle and devoured the last slice of bacon from the pan. Then he wiped his wide mouth on the back of his hand and produced his pipe from a pocket of his patched and weather-stained jumper. After knocking the ashes out of the bowl he looked inquiringly at his companion. " What lak your tobac, Dick? " he asked.

Dick took the somewhat broad hint and speedily opened one of his bags and produced a plug of tobacco that he had put in a handy place for just such a time as this. " I think it is good," he said, " though I have not tried it myself. I want to grow for another year or two before I begin smoking."

" You plenty big," said the other, taking the tobacco and swiftly slicing off a pipefull of it with his sheath-knife. Then, " You bring more nor this, Dick? " he asked, anxiously.

Dick reassured him on this point by showing

him the sealed canister. When his pipe was well alight, the old fellow got slowly to his moccasined feet and began a minute survey of Dick's belongings. Now and again he nodded his head. Now and again he put a brief question. "Dat good outfit," he said, at last, "but a'mighty heavy, you bet! Heap big load for one canoe, Dick. Dat right, yes. But we tak him a'right."

It was a big load and no mistake, and Dick wondered how the old fellow would manage it. But Billy Blunt had warned Sober Sam of the size of the outfit and so Sam had brought his largest canoe down from Two-Fox Pond — a strong, wide but heavy craft fully twenty-two feet in length. As the birch-bark canoes of this region usually run from sixteen to nineteen feet in length, this of Sober Sam's was a giant among its kind.

They carried the outfit down the twisting path to the edge of the river. There lay the canoe, lifted just clear of the water. The Indian slipped it back into the stream, in an eddy behind a big rock, and told Dick to hold it in position. Then he loaded it, leaving room in the bow for Dick and in the stern for himself. There were two paddles and an extra pole already aboard. At

last everything was stowed to the old man's taste. With his pole in one hand and gripping the gunnel with the other he steadied the canoe while Dick crawled forward to his place.

The canoe lay in an eddy of comparatively quiet water, with her low, sharp bow almost touching the big, sheltering rock. Beyond that narrow haven the river raced and bellowed, breaking into white " ripples " in a hundred places. Dick sat very still, his heart a-flutter with excitement, and wondered how one old man could dream of forcing a canoe up that swirling way, fair in the white and clashing teeth of those furious tons of water. But he asked no questions. This was one of the lessons of the new life that he had to learn. He glanced apprehensively at the churning rapids, wondered, and hoped for the best.

Presently he saw that the bow of the canoe was slipping sideways along the face of the boulder toward the outer tumult. Slowly, steadily it moved: and now it hung in the racing current and he felt the grip of the water churning beneath him. Like a sharp and solid rock the bow of the canoe stood motionless against the force of the river, crowned and edged with spray. And now, wonder of wonders, it began to slip up against

all that roaring madness — slowly, smoothly, unflinchingly. Again it hung motionless, while the white and black water tossed and shouted around it and gripped at its spray-hidden sides. Again it crawled forward. Again it hung, giving not so much as an inch to the thrust of the stream. And thus, yard by yard, with wonderful cunning, old Sober Sam and his long spruce pole slid the loaded canoe up through the Push-an'-be-dam' rapids. Twice they rested during the climb, each time slipping aside into an eddy under the wooded bank.

It was noon when the unbroken water above the rapids was reached, and Sam ran the nose of the long craft against a soft spot in the bank and remarked that it was time to "bile de kittle." Dick lost no time in scrambling ashore. His legs were cramped and his head still rang with the tumult of the waters through which they had just passed. Here was a strip of low, grass-grown shore. On both sides of the river the country was flatter here than farther down stream. Great cedars slanted out of the dusky forests and hung their ragged branches over the water. The river ran black and fairly swift, but unbroken by rocks and unvexed by shallows. Here its voice was

no more than a murmur. But the clamour of the rapids still pulsed in the air.

Sober Sam was as fresh as if he had not lifted a hand since sun-up. He secured the canoe by dragging it for half its length on to the soft grass. Then, with his axe, he splintered a dry "butt;" and in another minute had a fire going merrily.

"We go easy till sun-down," he said, "so maybe you get rifle ready. You get shot, maybe, at moose or somethin'. Dis a'mighty good country."

Dick was delighted with the suggestion, and immediately unpacked his new rifle and a dozen cartridges. "Is it a good trapping-country, too?" he asked.

Sam nodded. "Ol' Pierre Lacross, his country dis," he said. "Plenty mink, plenty otter, heap fox, too. Good country, yes."

"Does Pierre Lacross live on the river?" asked Dick. "Billy did not mention him to me. I thought there was no shack between the end of the road and yours on Two-Fox Pond."

"Billy, him not long on Little Beaver," replied the Indian. "Dat shack you camp by las' night — dat Pierre's shack, yes."

"But nobody lives there, now. It is deserted."

"Dat a'right, Dick. Pierre Lacross, him dead six-seven year back; but Pierre still trap on dis country, yes."

CHAPTER III

THE STORY OF PIERRE LACROSS, THE HALF-BREED TRAPPER. TWO-FOX POND

YOUNG Dick Ramsey stared in amazement at his smoky-faced guide. Was the old fellow making fun of him? No, there was not a twinkle in the black eyes.

"But you have just said that he is dead. Dead men don't trap!" exclaimed Dick.

Sam was slicing fat salt pork into the pan. "Dat maybe so — in you country," he said; "but on Little Beaver — well, dat right what I say. Pierre, him dead a'right — but still him trap dis country, yes."

"That is a queer story," said Dick. "I can't quite swallow such a steep yarn as that, Sam. Have you ever seen him at work — since his death? Seeing is believing, you know."

"Maybe," replied the redskin, calmly. "See a'mighty queer tings, me. Anyhow, tell you queer story 'bout Pierre Lacross."

He told the story while they ate their pork

and buckwheat "flap-jacks" and drank their tea. Here it is: but not quite in Sober Sam's own words.

Pierre Lacrosse was a French *breed* who appeared suddenly, one autumn, on the head-waters of Little Beaver, from no-one-knows-where. He was all alone. McDodd was not lumbering on the lower river then, and that is where Pierre commenced his trapping. Sober Sam, going down the river one day, in January, on his snow-shoes, stopped at Pierre's camp. The half-breed did not seem at all pleased with the visit and failed to invite Sam to take so much as a mug of tea. Pierre seemed unstrung, and could not sit still for a minute. He kept looking around all the time and cocking his head sideways as if listening for something. All these things soon got on Sam's nerves; so he speedily hit the trail again and put five miles between himself and Pierre's shack before halting to boil his kettle. He had a long journey before him, for he was bound for Wolf's Landing, to buy provisions. A wolverine had torn into his stores and upset his calculations. That night, and the next, he slept in the snow, in a deep trench with a fire at his feet. Well, Sam got his flour and pork and returned to

Two-Fox Pond without calling on Pierre on his return trip. He did not see the half-breed again until several years later.

When the lumbermen commenced operations on the lower waters of Little Beaver, Pierre Lacross moved farther up stream and built a shack beside Push-an'-be-dam' rapids. Now there was a young man named Running Thunder, with a squaw and two papooses, already trapping that country. It was good country (perhaps you would not find any better if you went all the way up to Hudson Bay), and had been in the family of Running Thunder for many generations. So big was the region, and so lonely, that the young man did not know that a stranger was taking toll of his own forests and streams until the middle of the first winter. Then, making the round of his traps one February morning, he happened upon Pierre's trail in the snow. By the marks of the racquets he knew that the poacher (for Pierre was nothing else, according to the laws of the wilderness) was not a man of his own tribe. The snow-shoes of his tribe were not so long as these impressions in the snow; also, they were wider in the frame and the thongs were not strung in the same way. All these things were as easily

read by Running Thunder as a printed page by you. But he learned more than this from the marks in the snow. The poacher was light of weight and carried no load. He was long of leg, and fresh. A man without a load must have his headquarters somewhere near. Therefore he was not a traveller, but a trapper — and he was trapping in Running Thunder's own country. Again the young man stooped low over the tell-tale marks in the snow and read that the trespasser had passed this way within the hour. He hung his three fresh fox skins in a tree, along with the frozen carcasses of two hares that he had found in his wire nooses, and with his rifle in his hand set off on the stranger's trail at a brisk trot.

It was about noon when Running Thunder caught sight of Pierre Lacross. Pierre halted and turned, and trembled like dry grass in a wind. The young man told him, in broken French, that he must stop taking furs in the Little Beaver country, between Push-an'-be-dam' rapids and Two-Fox Pond. All the time that he was talking the other continued to tremble and glance from side to side.

" I see that you have the shadow of fear in your soul even now," said Running Thunder, " and

I tell you, by the spirit of my father, you will have a new fear in your heart if you do not go out of my country before the new moon."

Then Pierre Lacross answered, with his teeth chattering, " I will stay here. I have gone to many places, even in the settlements, and have found no rest. So here I mean to stay."

" Very good," replied Running Thunder. " I see, at a glance, that you are a man ridden by black memories. But I will not have you in my trapping-grounds, for I have a family to keep and need all the pelts — and you may bring a curse on this country. On the night of the new moon I will come to your shack — and if you are there I will send your spirit away even though your body may stay."

Pierre did not seem to mind the threat. He scarcely seemed to heed it, but kept glancing around him, on every side.

" My spirit will stay here," he said. " This is a safe country."

Running Thunder went back to his lodge, wondering what the trouble was in the poacher's mind. It was something very black, for he had seen the shadow of it in the shifting eyes. However, he felt no pity, for the half-breed's face was

bad. He returned to his smoky lodge, far over on the flank of Lonely Mountain, gave the frozen hares to his squaw, cleaned and stretched the fox skins, and smoked his pipe for a long time. He did not say a word of the poacher to his squaw.

Nine days and nights passed away and the new moon, as thin as a shaving in the lap of a paddle-maker, hung in the frosty sky. Running Thunder, quiet as a shadow, moved over to the one tiny window in Pierre's shack. He held his old, muzzle-loading rifle in his hand. He saw a red shadow of fire-light against the frosted glass. He knocked on the pane with his gloved knuckles, and then (being of a cautious turn of mind) held one of his racquets across the window. *Crack* went a rifle in the cabin, and the glass broke tinkling and the netting of the snow-shoe was ripped. Running Thunder let a terrible, screeching groan out of him and dropped the snow-shoe. Then he brought his rifle up to his shoulder and turned around on his feet. He was smiling to think what would have happened to him if he had put his face in front of the little window. The light was misty with star-shine but enough for his purpose. He heard the door of the shack

swing open. He heard incautious footsteps on the packed snow. Then Pierre Lacross appeared around the corner, anxious to take a look at his victim. But he never saw him. Running Thunder aimed deliberately and pulled the trigger.

Running Thunder wrought according to his lights — and they, like the star-shine, were somewhat misty. But a man must defend his rights. Also, had not the stranger fired the first shot? He had no mind to get the law on his trail, however — for sometimes the law reached its arm even up into that vast wilderness. Now, Running Thunder knew well that the law of the wilds and the law of the courts did not agree on all points, and he had no wish to set them clashing. He had done his duty — and the less known of it the better. So he stripped the cold body of the poacher and burned the clothing on the fire that still danced on the hearth. Then, leaving the cabin as he had found it — save for the presence of the owner, — he dragged the naked body far away across the frozen snow. At last he unfastened the thong by which he had drawn it along, and left it lying stiff and slim in the misty star-shine. "The foxes will pick his bones," he said. It was dawn when he got back to his

lodge. He said nothing of his night's work to his squaw.

It was not until May that any questions were asked about Pierre Lacross. It was a tall, red-haired policeman from Quebec who was looking for the half-breed. He had some men from Wolf's Landing with him. Well, there was Pierre's shack, anyway. The door was open; the frying-pan lay on the floor beside the hearth; a gold watch hung on a nail at the head of the bunk; there were snow-shoes, rifle, tea-kettle, everything. A bear had torn open several bags of provisions and a pair of mice had built a nest among the blankets in the bunk. But the trapper was gone. Yes, he had been gone a long while — two or three months, by the look of things.

" I wanted him bad," said the policeman. " He killed his wife, down in the Tobique country, three years ago." Then he went back to Quebec.

It was early in the following winter that Running Thunder, his squaw and the two papooses paid a visit to Sober Sam's shack on Two-Fox Pond. They had all their gear with them — traps, grub and blankets.

Sam fed them before he asked any questions. As soon as he put the first question, Running

Thunder gave him a look and then told some foolish story about the fur being all killed-out along Little Beaver. Sam, of course, pretended to agree with him. When the squaw and the little ones were asleep Running Thunder told the truth. He and Sober Sam belonged to the same tribe, and so he knew that his secret was safe. So he told about the poacher, and how he had shot him and then put him out on the snow for the foxes.

"He was a bad man," said the brave. "The policeman came for him, for he had killed his wife. But he said his spirit would stay in this country — and he said the truth! His spirit is trapping on Little Beaver. I have seen it. I do not know if it takes any furs — but there is not room for two in that country, so I have come away. I will go over into the Neepicsis country. I do not like to meet the spirit of that half-breed when I go the round of my traps."

Sober Sam thought that the young man was afraid of his own memories. He gave him two pounds of tobacco, and three tins of condensed milk, and wished him luck in the Neepicsis country. So Running Thunder and his family went far away to the westward. Two days later,

Sam made up a small pack and went down stream into the country that his friend had left. It was a fine place for mink, otter, fox and ermine — and perhaps he would get a few traps in the most likely spots. This would be perfectly honest, for now it was a no-man's land. He spent a week in the deserted territory, and in that time took two fine otters, a patch fox and three mink. He had visions of wealth — of great wealth to be quickly spent down in the settlements. But, one starlit night, he saw something that drove the thought of wealth quite out of his mind. He saw Pierre Lacross, stark naked, walking over the snow light as a feather and glancing from side to side as if looking for something that he did not want to see.

So he struck out for his own country without waiting for morning.

And that is the story of Pierre Lacross, told by Sober Sam to Dick Ramsey, over a meal of fried pork and milkless tea.

When the old man had finished speaking Dick gazed at him in silence for fully a minute.

"Do you really expect me to — to swallow that, Sam?" he asked, at last.

"Swallow? How you mean?" inquired the

guide, looking at him with deep, unblinking eyes. "You swallow tea and pork, yes. What you mean, Dick?"

Dick felt confused. "Now about that spirit? Do you want me to think that you have told me a true story? Perhaps you are only playing a joke on me. But it is a beastly yarn, and no mistake. Honestly, Sam, do you expect me to believe that you saw the spirit of Pierre Lacross walking on the snow?"

Sober Sam gazed at the young man steadily for a long time. Then he turned his eyes to the canoe and pointed at it with his hand. "Me see one good canoe. B'lieve dat?"

"Yes."

"A'right. Den you b'lieve me see what you hear. Sam no liar! He tell truth, yes. What you t'ink him not trap dat good country for, anyhow? What you t'ink no one trap it for? Injun know one t'ing — white man know somethin' else. You trap dis country, Dick, an' maybe you know as much as Sam. Me trap him once. Dat heap too much! yes."

Dick was puzzled. He did not believe in any such tommyrot as this — and yet he was sure that Sam was not joking with him. It was quite evi-

dent that the old redskin believed every word of his crazy story.

"Heap more queer t'ing nor dat in de woods," said Sam, gently. "You larn plenty, bime-bye."

Dick said nothing more about the strange story just then; but it was a long time before he could get it out of his mind. As soon as the old tribesman had smoked his pipe to the bitter heel the canoe was shoved into the water again and the voyage was continued. They still kept close to the shore, for the current was too strong for a comfortable use of the paddles. Sam stood, bending easily to every thrust of the long pole. Dick sat at his ease in the bow, with his rifle between his knees. The sun rode high in the south, flooding the river and the gloomy forests with gold. Dick fondled his rifle, eager for a chance to exhibit to his companion his skill with the weapon. He had shot for his school in more than one big match and had done his share toward winning more than one cup. But he had never squinted along the sights at a living target. He had been told that this was quite a different game from match shooting. As the canoe slipped noiselessly up stream he scanned the rugged shores with keen

and eager eyes. He could see nothing but shining water and overhanging shadows.

Suddenly the canoe stopped dead in its smooth advance. Dick glanced over his shoulder and saw that Sober Sam was pointing straight ahead with his left hand while he held the canoe firm against the current with his right. He turned and again fixed his gaze on the dusky shores. Ah! there was something. But what? It was black, bulky and motionless. Was it a bush, standing close to the water's edge, taller by a foot or two than the surrounding brush? Did it move? What was that on top of it, that caught the glint of the sun? He began to tremble. Then he heard a low whisper behind him. "Bull moose. 'Bout seventy yard." The shell was in the breech, the mark was motionless and the canoe was steady. Seventy yards — point-blank range. The back-sight was flat. All was ready — and it was an easy shot. But Dick's hands trembled. He pressed his elbows against the gunnels of the canoe; but it was no use. His arms jumped like newly-landed fish. A mist swam across his vision. Then he saw the great, black head sway a little and the massive, branching antlers flash in the sun. He rubbed the mist from his eyes and

raised his rifle. The butt-plate bounced against his shoulder as if it were alive and the barrel wobbled and canted.

Dick knew what the trouble was. This was a severe attack of the "buck fever" that he had heard men speak of in Quebec and at Wolf's Landing. It is an absolute panic of the nerves that comes to most people when they first try to bring the tip of the foresight and the "V" of the backsight into line against a hairy flank or neck.

At last, in sheer desperation, Dick pressed the trigger. At the sharp report there was a fine commotion in the bushes as the great bull flung himself around and found his stride for the tall timber.

Again the canoe began to move up against the current. Dick turned a flushed face toward his companion. The old man was poling easily, and smiling. "Plenty heap more moose where him come from," he said. And then, "You pull de trigger a'right, anyhow, Dick. You hit some-t'ing nex' time, maybe."

CHAPTER IV

BRUIN ON THE PORTAGE. SIGNS OF A THIEF

That night they slept in the open, with their feet to a fire of white birch; and next morning they came to the foot of Trap Rapids.

"The devil couldn't pole canoe up him," said Sober Sam; so the canoe was run ashore and unloaded and a portage was made. It was a half-mile portage — and it was a good deal harder to make than to write about. The outfit alone could not be carried around the rapids in less than four loads and the empty canoe made a fifth. Sam arranged the packs and off they started on the first trip. The trail was narrow and twisting, leading over rocky hummocks, around mud-holes and fallen trees and through tangled bottoms. The Indian jogged along and Dick did his best to keep up with him. The guide was soon out of sight, however, and the young Englishman was left to follow as best he could. He soon discovered that the pack on his shoulders was heavier than he had at first supposed. It

developed several sharp corners, too, that prodded him at every step. The stake across his right shoulder, by which the pack was kept high up against his neck, seemed to be cutting him to the bone. But he kept bravely along, stooping far forward to ease the drag on his shoulders. He had made about half the journey when he met Sober Sam returning, empty-handed.

"You do mighty good for greenhorn," remarked Sam, passing with a grin. Dick forced a grin in reply and staggered on. Now he was looking for an excuse to let the pack slip to the ground. He was big and strong for his age; but he was not toughened to this sort of thing.

Suddenly an excuse for dropping the pack presented itself in the trail before him. Rounding a corner of tumbled rocks and tangled brush he beheld the excuse standing in his path, not more than twenty yards away, in the form of a big black bear. Dick halted, at first too amazed to loosen his grip on the stake on his shoulder, and let the pack fall to the trail behind him. He stood there, hunched forward, staring at the bear. He tried to recall to his mind all that he had ever read about the bears of this country. He remembered that they were not dangerous like

the grizzly of the far west, in fact that they were timid except when very hungry. A shout would frighten them — yes, he had read that. But how was he to know that the blueberry crop in this part of the country had been very light this year and that this particular bear was quite frantic with the gnawings of hunger? And a gentle breeze blew from Dick to the bear, carrying the fragrance of the provisions in the pack to its keen nose.

Dick decided that the correct thing to do was to frighten bruin out of his path; so he shouted and staggered toward it. But he did not stagger far. To his dismay, the bear arose heavily but swiftly to its hind legs and stood in the narrow trail, swaying slightly from side to side. Again Dick came to a sudden halt; but now he was within fifteen yards of the bear. He had a good view of its small, red eyes, its half-open mouth and small, gleaming teeth, its big paws hanging before its massive chest. He took note of these things — and then he let his pack slip from his shoulders and turned and started back along the trail. He looked over his shoulder as he ran, and seeing that the bear was not following him with that swift but lumbering run of which he had so

often read he halted and turned again. He saw bruin drop to all-fours and walk along to the fallen pack. He saw him sniff the several bags and packages inquiringly, then raise one of his great paws and strike sharply at one of the bags. One blow did the work. The bag was ripped from top to bottom and out flowed the evaporated apples in white and tender fragments. Bruin sniffed again, then began to eat greedily and with evident relish. This was too much for Dick Ramsey.

"The black robber!" he muttered. "What I need is my rifle."

So he turned and started back toward the canoe at his best pace. But he had not gone far before he met Sober Sam, bent almost double under his load but jogging along as if this portage work was no more trouble than eating dinner. Sam leaned backward against a tree, thus easing himself of the weight of the pack, while Dick told him about the bear in a few breathless words.

"Skin good?" asked the Indian, calmly. "Fur plenty thick?"

"Yes, it seemed to be in fair condition. His teeth and claws were in good shape, anyway," replied Dick.

"Dat so. Fur gettin' thick now, for winter. Pretty good, maybe, but better one moon later. A'right, we shoot him. You hurry, Dick, or old b'ar he get awful belly-ache with all dem apples. He get away, maybe, an' drink plenty water. Den apples swell an' old b'ar he bust."

Dick was soon back with the rifle. Sober Sam lowered his pack to the trail and straightened his back.

"You shoot or me shoot?" he asked.

"I — I think I'll have another try," replied Dick, blushing at the memory of his shot at the moose. "I was in a blue funk yesterday; but I must get over that."

"A'right," said Sam. "You just t'ink him one target an' shoot him bull's eye."

They went forward quietly and soon came in sight of the bear. He was still busy with the evaporated apples and seemed to be tremendously pleased with himself and his surroundings.

"It seems a pity to shoot him when he is enjoying himself so," whispered Dick.

"Dat what you t'ink about bull moose, yesterday, maybe," returned Sober Sam with a sly grin. Dick saw that pity had no place in the work in hand and that his budding reputation

as a woodsman and fur-taker was at stake. He lay flat and brought the sights in line against a vital spot under the bear's left shoulder. He took the Indian's advice and imagined that the hairy form was nothing but a lifeless target. So successful was this that one shot was enough. The bear rolled over, kicked feebly and then lay still.

"Now we skin him — an' den we finish portage," remarked Sober Sam.

Dick was not so cool about it as his companion. He rushed forward and examined the bulky, lifeless body with mingled sensations of pride and pity. Blood stained the evaporated apples that still remained upon the ground. Thin flakes of the dried fruit still hung from the bear's stiff jaws. It was a pitiful sight; but, on the other hand, it was his first bear — the first large animal that had ever fallen to his rifle — the beginning of his career as a fur-taker. One who takes toll of the wilderness, with trap and rifle, must harden himself to the sight of blood and huddled, lifeless forms.

The skinning of the bear was a task that took a good deal of time, skill and strength. Dick supplied some of the required strength and ob-

tained a useful lesson. With the hide off the carcass was found to be very thin. They threw it aside into a thicket of spruces and went on with the task of transporting the outfit from the foot of the rapids to the top. It was close upon noon when Sam made the last trip, with the canoe upon his shoulders, bottom-up.

Two-Fox Pond was reached safely early in the afternoon. It was a good-sized lake, about three miles in length and from half a mile to a mile in width. The forests hemmed it in like a crowding army; pine, spruce and cedar on the lower ground and maple and birch on the ridges of the hills. Sober Sam's shack was near the lower end of the lake. Three miles across the hills from the upper end lay another lake and the head-waters of Smoky River. The lake was called Smoky Pot. On the height of land between Two-Fox Pond (the rise of Little Beaver) and Smoky Pot (the rise of Smoky River) stood Wigwam Mountain. Dick learned this, and much more of the surrounding country, gradually.

The brief Indian summer soon passed — a fleeting season of warmth and gold and blue haze after the first frost. The Indians say it is in these beautiful days that the Sun God

smokes his pipe before retiring to his lodge for his long winter sleep. The azure haze on the hills is the smoke of his giant pipe and the warmth is the glow of the burning tobacco in the great bowl. All too soon he draws the last whiff; then he shakes the dead ashes out of his pipe and frost and snow descend upon the wilderness.

Ice formed across Two-Fox Pond early in November. Then the first heavy fall of snow came in the night, cloaking the wilderness a foot deep. By this time the canoe was in a snug shelter of bark, and one long line of traps was set. This line ran westward from the shack for a distance of about twelve miles, and was to be Dick's especial care. It skirted several nameless ponds, crossed three small streams and some considerable hills, and twisted through gloomy forests and over desolate barrens. Fifteen traps and dead-falls were set on this line — three dead-falls for bear, steel traps for fox and sable, and some snares of Sam's own invention for mink and ermine. The Indian intended to run another line of traps up the eastern shore of the lake, across the height of land and around the base of Wigwam Mountain; and still another down the river to the edge of the country that used to

be trapped by Pierre Lacross. But all this could not be done in a day — nor yet in ten days.

Sober Sam taught Dick to walk and run on the snow-shoes or racquets, to handle an axe in true woodsman style, to distinguish the trails of various animals in the snow and to observe the general lie and character of the country through which they travelled. Dick proved himself a quick student; but even to the quickest the science and thousand nice points of woodcraft are not mastered in a dozen lessons.

The first snow-fall was soon followed by a second — and now winter was upon them in earnest. The frost struck deep into earth, water and wood. Under the snow the forest mould was hard as iron. The inmost fibres of the great trees were gripped by the knife-edged frost. The rivers were muffled under ever-thickening roofs of ice, and even the clashing rapids were bridged and shackled save for a tiny air-hole here and there. But, day after day, the small, colourless sun accomplished his brief voyage across a cloudless sky.

Early one morning, at the break of dawn, Dick set out alone to make his first round of inspection of the westward line of traps. He

carried his sleeping-bag (in case some accident should keep him abroad all night), tea and a tin kettle, a little cold bacon and bread, his rifle, axe and a small compass. He had eaten a good breakfast and stepped out manfully into the frosty, silent forest. The first lights were just lifting, low and wide, above the eastern and south-eastern hills. He felt proud, and eager for adventure. He reached the first trap within half an hour of leaving the shack and found the frozen remains — fragments of bone and skin, a brush and the distorted mask — of a red fox. He knew this to be the work of the wolverine, from stories his companion had told him of the habits of the beasts of this country. Even for a wolverine it must have been a very tough and unsavoury meal. He cleared up the mess, reset the trap and rebaited it with a piece of rabbit flesh and then looked around for some sign of the gluttonous thief. He found its tracks leading to and away from the trap, but the outlines of the footprints were so smeared that he knew the visit had been made several days before. So he continued on his way, having no time to waste in hunting for the wolverine which, no doubt, was miles away by this time — even taking toll of

another of his traps, perhaps. It would have gone hard with the greedy thief if Dick had caught a sight of him just then.

The sun was up now, and Dick moved along his line at a good pace. He found the second trap empty and undisturbed; but there were plenty of "signs" in the snow around it. He saw where a fox had circled it several times and a lynx had come within a foot of it. Deciding that something was wrong with the location of the trap or the way it had been set, he uncovered it and unfastened the chain which held it to the base of a small spruce tree. Then he drew on an extra pair of mittens, the palms of which had been smeared with bacon fat to kill the man-smell, lifted the trap and carried it to a new position about ten yards away from the old. After placing it to his taste he brushed the snow lightly over it with a spruce branch and over the nearer marks of his snow-shoes as well. This precaution was not to hide his tracks but to bury the scent of where his moccasins touched the snow. The noses of the wilderness folk are keen to discover the smell of man.

Dick found a mink in the third trap, a large specimen with the fur in perfect condition. He

did not stop to skin it then, but drew down a maple sapling, fastened the long, slim body to the top and let the young tree spring back to an upright position. Little he thought, when he thus put the body of the mink out of harm's way from the hungry prowlers of the forest that he was sealing the fate of his enemy the wolverine. Later, Dick found two common foxes and an ermine. He dealt with the foxes as he had with the mink; but he put the little ermine in his pocket. He had a great deal of difficulty in finding some of the traps; and by noon he had not covered more than half of his outward journey. He made a small fire, boiled the kettle and steeped tea, and ate half of his bread and bacon. He saw that he should have to deal with the remainder of the traps much more quickly than he had been able to with the others to get back to the shack that night. Just then the thought of spending the night alone in the forest was not unpleasant. The sun was shining brightly, you see, and he was in fine feather over the mink, the ermine and the two foxes. But, even then, he hoped that luck would be with him and that night would find him in his own familiar bunk.

Luck was against him, however, as far as ma-

king a swift journey was concerned. He passed an empty dead-fall and several more empty traps and congratulated himself on making very good time. But when he arrived at the edge of the big barren he saw something that promised to delay him. Not more than forty yards away, and moving at a leisurely pace across his position, was a small herd of caribou. There were five animals in the herd; and the leader was a fine stag with broad and many-pointed antlers. This was a chance that Dick could not let pass unchallenged, no matter what delay it might cause him. Here was a chance for his first caribou, for a store of fresh meat for himself and his companion, and for a fine pair of antlers. He was excited; but he forced his hands and eyes to steadiness, lay down in the snow, took a quick but sure aim and pressed the trigger. The stag halted, threw back its fine head, staggered forward a few paces and then plunged on collapsed knees into the feathery snow. Twice it struggled to its feet. Twice it fell again; and then it lay still. The rest of the herd stood around their fallen leader in wonder for several seconds; but suddenly, getting a sniff of the warm blood, they dashed away.

CHAPTER V

A HAIR-RAISING NIGHT. A STRANGE DISCOVERY IN THE MORNING

When Dick reached the stag he found it dead as wood. The bullet had entered behind the left shoulder, had passed through the heart and come out at the base of the neck on the right side. He was glad that he had made such a clean, sure, merciful shot. Drawing his knife from its leather sheath he bled the carcass according to instructions received from Sober Sam. He did not like the job; but in the wilderness a man must do whatever comes to his hand. Out on the treeless barren he felt the icy thrust of the wind; so he laid hold of the hind legs of the stag and dragged it, by short stages, to the edge of the woods. Then he began to skin it. Poor Dick! The carcass was already as stiff as a log and the air was so bitterly cold that he could not uncover his hands for more than a few seconds at a time. The blood froze on his woollen, fur-lined mittens, stiffening them so that he could scarcely close

his hand on the haft of his knife. As fast as he pulled the hide away from the carcass it became as hard as a board.

Dick saw that, if he finished the skinning and cutting of the caribou, he would not only have to spend the night in the open, but would, very likely, have to leave the inspection of the remaining traps until morning. Already, the sun was low upon the hills in front of him. Long shadows slanted across the snow. He gazed around him, standing knife in hand above the half-skinned carcass of the stag, and felt something akin to fear at the silence, the emptiness and the vastness that surrounded him. He saw the dusk gathering like an inflowing tide among the black spruces. "I must get used to this sort of thing," he muttered, and stooped again to his task. Now he worked as if his life depended upon the flesh and hide of the stag. He wanted to have his fire burning strongly and his sleeping-place ready before dark. At last he got the skin clear, cutting it free from the carcass at the legs and the neck. He severed the antlers from the head by breaking off the top of the skull with his axe. But now the lower rim of the sun was behind the distant forest, so, waiting only to hack

off one hind-quarter, he loaded himself and hurried back along his trail a distance of several hundreds of yards. He would let the rest of the meat take its chance with the hungry prowlers of the night.

Dick lost no time about settling on a place to make camp. Under the big trees and beside a thicket of young spruce he dropped his load and his rifle. With his axe he set briskly to work to get together enough fire-wood to last through the night, some dry and some green. He was fortunate enough to find some small birches close at hand and several dead spruces. These he had soon trimmed and cut into three-foot lengths. Then, using one of his long snow-shoes for a shovel, he dug a trench in the drifted snow against the thicket. He dug right down to the frozen moss for a distance of about ten feet. As the snow was still light he pressed the sides and ends of the trench with his snow-shoe. He laid a little roof of spruce branches across one end and bedded it with the same material. In the other end of the trench he built his fire.

By the time Dick had accomplished all this night had settled over the wilderness, the last glow of red had departed and the stars were

glinting frostily high above the black spires of the forest. Dick thrust his snow-shoes, tail-first, into the wall of the trench, removed his mittens and outer coat, laid his sleeping-bag, rifle and axe under the narrow roof and arranged his simple cooking-kit beside the fire. Then he filled the kettle with new snow and put it to melt in the edge of the fire and cut a generous slice from the haunch of venison. Soon a fragrant odour stole up and away into the gloomy forest. The cheery heat and radiance of the crackling fire filled the long, narrow trench. It was hard to believe that millions of acres of gloom and frost pressed close up to that little fire on every side.

"This is really quite home-like," remarked Dick, turning the sizzling steak in the pan.

Tired from his long day's work, he soon removed his moccasins and outer stockings from his feet and slipped into his sleeping-bag. Half the night's supply of wood was above him, on the edge of the trench, and the rest was beside his couch. His rifle lay at his right hand, with four cartridges in the magazine and one in the breech. The breath of the fire beat along the white, glistening walls of his retreat in soothing, comforting waves; and in two minutes he was sound asleep.

Dick awoke suddenly and, in the same fraction of a second, sat bolt upright. The sound that had brought him so sharply from his deep slumber had died from the air, but was still ringing in his brain. What was it? What could it have been? The echo of it rang in his ears, high and weird. He sat very still, listening, waiting for it to again break the silence of the frosty night. His right hand was on the grip of his rifle and his eyes stared straight ahead, above the sunken fire and into the enveloping shadows of the forest. So he sat, without moving a muscle, for several minutes. He heard the low fire crackle furtively and a tip of ash fall from a smouldering stick onto the red coals beneath. He heard the sudden, clear snapping of the frost in the great trees above and around him. But the sound that had awakened him did not return — just then. He changed his position, bending far forward so that he could look upward past the edge of the roof of brush. He could see nothing but the glinting of the stars beyond the black masses of the spruces. He drew himself out of the sleeping-bag and placed some birch-bark and an armfull of wood on the fire. The flames leapt upward, casting a red light into the forest beyond the edges

of the trench. Dick lit a roll of the inflammable bark at the fire and held it high above his head so that it threw its red glow far around among the tree trunks. But he could see nothing but snow and shadows and the massive pillars of the forest. The torch burned down close to his hand; and just as he let it drop the noise that had startled him from his sleep shrilled again on the air. It was an indescribable noise, high and keen, beastly and yet with something human about it. It was partly a cry, partly mad laughter. For several seconds it rang across the frosty night, and then fell silent.

While the terrific noise lasted Dick stood motionless, gripped by a nameless terror. Upon the return of silence he stooped and snatched up his rifle, kicked the fire into a burst of flame and faced the direction from which the sound had come. The direction was that of the carcass of the caribou. He trembled; but he stood firm, ready to meet any attack — an attack from anything — with five steel-napped bullets. It was a desperate sort of courage that possessed him, however, for there had been something unearthly, unbelievable, in that cry from the outer darkness. He told himself (but failed to convince himself),

that it was the voice of a wolf, a fox, a lynx or a wild-cat. On his arrival in the country he had once heard the cry of that great northern water-bird, the loon. That had been hideous enough; but this was a thousand times worse. And even if the sounds had been the same, what would a loon be doing out on the frozen, snow-sheeted barren? He had heard the night-cries of foxes, wolves and the two big varieties of cats that were native to the wilderness; but this was like none of these.

Dick waited, ready for he knew not what, for fully fifteen minutes; but nothing came and the sound was not again repeated. He mended the fire and paced back and forth between it and his bed, keeping a sharp look-out on every side. Presently, from the same direction from which the cry had come, he heard the yelp of a fox. That commonplace sound gave him fresh courage; but he did not relish the thought that the prowlers were eating that good meat and arguing over their meal. He fired a shot into the darkness, to let them know that the rightful owner of the caribou was not far away. Silence followed the sharp report of the rifle.

Dick did not return to his sleeping-bag, but

spent the remainder of the night on guard, alert and anxious, fearing that at any moment that terrible sound — half cry and half mad laughter — might again assail his ears. At the first hint of dawn he drew on his moccasins and outer coat, scrambled out of the trench and slipped his feet into the toe-loops of his snow-shoes and started cautiously for the edge of the barren. You may be sure that his rifle was in his hand. He moved very quietly, hoping to catch sight of something that might throw some light on the cause of the hideous sounds that had robbed him of his rest. The grey light sifted faintly between the tree-trunks and through the high, massed branches. When he sighted the carcass at last he saw something moving near it, something small and black against the grey shimmer of the snow. He knelt and fired; but the light was bad and the little animal — whatever it was — darted away. With a grunt of disgust he got to his feet again and hurried forward.

As he glanced down at the carcass of the stag an exclamation of dismay burst from his lips. Much of the flesh was gone — and he could see that it had not been torn away by the fangs of animals, but had been *cut with a sharp blade!* A

human being had been at work about the frozen stag in the night! A man had been here, in sight of the fire, had taken meat and gone secretly away. And the terrible cry he had heard? Could a human have made that hideous sound? The light was steadily increasing, and Dick stared around him and far out across the desolate barren, perplexed and shaken with apprehension. In fact he was so shaken that several minutes passed before he thought of examining the snow for information concerning his midnight visitor. Here was something written plainly enough, stamped on the soft, white surface in large type; but he could not read it. What he saw was unreal, unheard-of, and filled him with fresh apprehension and a vague alarm and distrust of his surroundings. Around the carcass, and leading to it and away from it, were large, oval prints in the snow. Dick knelt and examined one of them closely.

"Of course it was a man — a man of some sort," he murmured, "so these must be the marks of some kind of snow-shoe."

But if snow-shoes or racquets had left those prints then their owner was undoubtedly a lunatic. The impressions were almost as broad as they were long and showed no signs of tails. And to

make such solid marks the frames must have been filled with bark or rounds of hide instead of with the customary light network of woven thongs. And who but a man of imperfect intelligence would make or use such a snow-shoe as this? And who but a raving maniac would give voice to such terrible sounds as those that had aroused the young trapper from his heavy sleep and filled his heart with fear?

Where the mysterious stranger had not cut, foxes and other animals had gnawed at the frozen flesh of the caribou. Dick hacked off a few pounds to serve as bait for his traps and then returned to his fire, got breakfast and prepared to move along. He did not relish the idea of the man with the queer snow-shoes. He felt that the sooner his work was done and he was safe back on Two-Fox Pond the better. Much good fur would not have tempted him to spend another night alone beside that haunted barren. So he packed his kit, hung the hide, flesh and antlers of the caribou out of the reach of the foxes, and set out to finish the inspection of the traps. He travelled fast, anxious to be home before night-fall. He found a lynx in the first trap on the farther side of the barren. The next two were empty; but in the

last he found something to think about. The trap was lying as he and Sober Sam had left it, baited and set; but in looking closely at the bait he saw that it was a fragment of red flesh — the flesh of a hare, perhaps. Now he remembered very well that this particular trap, set in a low spot beside a frozen stream, had been baited with the head and shoulders of a two-pound trout that Sam had caught through a hole in the ice for this very purpose. Here was something to worry about, and no mistake — something considerably more serious than the theft of caribou meat and the hideous cries in the night. Here was a thief (unmistakable signs of him, at least), who was not above robbing another man's traps and calmly resetting them for his future profit! This sort of thing, Dick knew well, was one of the blackest crimes of the wilderness. Here was a robber more cunning and more dangerous than the wolverine. He felt no doubt that it was the same person who had helped himself to the choice cuts of the caribou.

Dick set out on the back trail with indignation aglow in his heart. He had expected to find honesty and fair-play in the wilderness; and instead he had found the most brazen robbery.

Yes, he was very angry. Also, he was somewhat alarmed. He could not get the thought of those terrible cries, and of those solid, round tracks in the snow like the foot-prints of some prehistoric monster, out of his mind.

Dick reached his camping-place of the night before with the skin of the lynx hanging from his belt. It was still early — not much past nine o'clock. He made a pack of the hide, antlers and flesh of the stag, fastened it high on his shoulders and hastened onward. He followed his old trail. He had not gone far before he saw the tracks of the midnight robber across his old trail at right-angles. And the tracks were fresh — fresher than his own of the previous evening. Beyond a doubt the mysterious stranger had crossed that way this very morning! For a moment he contemplated the advisability of following those strange tracks and bringing the thief to immediate account. But on second thoughts he decided that the safest thing to do was to keep to his own trail — for the present. He drew his rifle from its blanket case, however, and kept a sharp look-out on all sides as he tramped along. As he advanced he examined every trap again and skinned such animals as

he had hung out of harm's way the day before. Under the spur of anxiety, he deprived the frozen bodies of their warm pelts at a rate of speed that even Sober Sam would not have been ashamed of. Once more, at a point about five miles from Two-Fox Pond, the trail of the stranger crossed his.

When Dick came in sight of the sapling in the top of which he had hung the body of the first mink, he saw something that caused him to forget the human thief for a few minutes. High up in the leafless sapling, and within a foot of the frozen mink, was a small, bear-like beast doing its best to set its claws in the prize that swayed about so temptingly just out of reach. It was so intent on this business that it did not hear the trapper.

"The wolverine," murmured Dick, knowing the glutton by Sober Sam's descriptions of it. "The rascal that ate the fox." He steadied himself by leaning his shoulder against a tree, for the pack was heavy and he was tired, took unhurried aim and fired. The wolverine's hind legs lost their hold on the smooth bark of the sapling. For a few seconds he hung aloft by his fore-paws, then dropped lifeless into the snow.

"HIGH UP IN THE LEAFLESS SAPLING . . . WAS A SMALL, BEAR-LIKE BEAST."

CHAPTER VI

SOBER SAM RESPECTS THE SPIRIT OF THE DEAD HALF-BREED. THE WOLVES

Dick reached Two-Fox Pond without further adventure, early in the afternoon, and found the shack empty. His companion was away on one of the other lines of traps. So Dick cooked himself a dinner of pancakes and pork, ate it in comfort beside the hearth (with an apprehensive eye on the window, however, for dread of the being with the queer racquets was still with him), and afterwards, though he felt sleepy, set to work scraping and stretching the new skins. He found a good deal of satisfaction in this work, for every one of the pelts was excellent of its kind.

Sober Sam appeared at the shack shortly after sunset. He smiled pleasantly at Dick, stood his snow-shoes in a corner away from the fire, dropped a few pelts on the floor and brushed his hand across his face. He was breathing quickly. Dick lit the lantern.

"What luck, Sam?" he asked, glancing curiously at his companion.

"Pretty good," replied Sam. "Three mink, one fox, two ermine, one b'ar. Yes, dat pretty good luck, a'right. What you get, Dick?"

Dick showed the pelts he had brought in and told of the shooting of the caribou and the wolverine. But he did not tell his whole story then, for he felt that Sam also was withholding something. He stooped and examined the pelts that lay on the floor. "Where is the bear skin?" he asked, for it was not with the others.

"Dunno," replied Sam. "B'ar, he was in de dead-fall a'right; but he hadn't no skin on him. What you think, Dick? You think, maybe de b'ar in dis country don't grow no overcoats?"

"So there has been a thief on your line," remarked Dick.

Sam nodded. "Two-legged t'ief, him. Wolverine, he don't skin b'ar."

The Dick told of the knife-cuts in the carcass of the caribou, of the terrible cries in the night and of the rebaited trap. Also, he told of the queer snow-shoe tracks. Sober Sam, who by this time had filled and lighted his pipe, smoked in silence throughout the story. He looked very grave

and shook his head frequently. At last he spoke.

"Pierre Lacross, he make queer snow-shoe like dat, once. He too a'mighty lazy to make good racquet. Dat look like Pierre, a'right."

"Be serious!" cried Dick. "For this is a serious matter. We can not afford to have our traps robbed."

"Dat right," said Sam. "Bad bizness to have fur stole like dat. Dat b'ar skin now, he worth ten dollar maybe. Me serious a'right, Dick. Yes, you bet!"

"Then what had we better do?" asked Dick. "There is a thief in this country who is robbing our traps and trying to frighten us at the same time. That is what he made those frightful noises for. He frightened me that time, I admit; but he had better not try it again or he will find a few bullets whistling 'round his ears."

The Indian gazed at him with inscrutable eyes. "Bullets no good — dis time, anyhow. Guess we better shift our country, Dick, 'way up nort' a few days' journey. Yes, we better go 'way from dis part o' the country, you bet."

Dick stared at his dusky companion with anger and amazement in his face. "What the devil are

you talking about?" he cried. "Run away from a thief! But perhaps you are joking, Sam? I don't see the joke, but you may. But if you are, please stop it and talk sense. I did not come to this country for the express purpose of acting the fool. I could have done that at home."

"Dat no joke," replied Sober Sam, calmly. "Dat honest-injun-gospel-truth me tellin' you. Pierre Lacross, he shift his country, so we better shift ours too."

"What has this to do with Pierre Lacross?" asked Dick, in fretful wonder. "You told me he was dead. You told me that he was shot by Running Thunder."

Sober Sam nodded. "Yes, dat right. But I tell you how he still take fur, down by Push-and-be-damn. Now he move his country, I guess. He like dis country better, maybe."

"Do you mean to say that you believe the thief who is meddling with our traps is Lacross's ghost?" asked Dick incredulously.

"Pierre's spirit, yes. He trap just the same as before — dat spirit."

At this Dick fairly lost his temper. "What would a spirit want with caribou meat?" he jeered. "What does a ghost want with snow-

shoes? — and even if it was fool enough to wear them it would not sink six inches into the snow at every step. Rot! I thought you had some sense. I tell you, Sam, that spirit weighs as much as I do. But if you are afraid of it you can get out — you can go north just as soon as you want to — but you'll go alone, by thunder! I'd rather trap alone than with a man who would want me to shift my outfit every time something unusual happened. Here I stay, Sober Sam! It will take more than one half-breed, dead or alive, to frighten me out of this good trapping country. But you can go wherever you want to — straight to the devil, for all I care!"

"You heap tam brave young man, Dick," said the other, calmly.

"I am not a confounded coward, anyway," retorted Dick.

Sober Sam shook the ashes out of his pipe. "You think dat thief a common man. Maybe you right, Dick. He steal just like Pierre, an' he got same fool kind o' snow-shoe. Sober Sam, he no coward, too. You talk too quick — an' not so a'mighty polite as Billy Blunt told me neither."

"Polite?" returned Dick, smiling slightly. "Do you expect me to be polite under all circumstances? We are partners in the trapping business, Sam; and when my partner talks like a fool and wants to act like one I mean to tell him what I think of him, every time, whether he thinks it polite or not. And you are welcome to do the same by me, Sam."

They spent the evening working over the new skins and discussing the thief. Sam was not convinced that it was other than the spirit of the dead half-breed; but he was willing to stand by Dick and defy it. As he had said, he was no coward; but he confessed that he would not know exactly how to act should he come face to face with the mysterious robber of the traps. He remembered how he had acted when he had seen it down in Running Thunder's deserted country (he believed it to be the same thing), the winter after Running Thunder and his family had been driven away. What he had done on that memorable occasion was simply to turn around in his tracks and run until legs and wind gave out. He had a grave suspicion that he might behave in the same manner again under the same circumstances. But if he were only sure that the thief

was a man and not a spirit he would go out on its trail and hunt it to its retreat without a twinge of fear.

"What you do, Dick, when you see him?" he asked.

"Try to get hold of him." replied Dick, simply. "If he shows fight I'll fight too; and if he runs, and seems to be able to outrun me, then I'll open fire on him."

Sober Sam was deeply impressed by his young companion's fearless attitude.

Snow began to fall during the night and continued to drift down, out of a low, grey sky, all day. The trappers kept to the shack. They had plenty of work to do, for the skins required attention, socks and over-stockings needed darning and Sam was anxious to commence making two new pairs of snow-shoes. The wood for the frames was already seasoned and bent, having been gathered and whittled into shape the year before. Now the caribou hide had to be cut into strips of varying widths and prepared for weaving across the frames.

The snow ceased to fall about sun-down; and at an early hour of the following morning the trappers set out together on the westward line of

traps. The new-fallen snow, not yet packed down by the wind, made very heavy "going." The racquets sank fully eight inches at every step and came up each time with a freight of snow. Sober Sam took the lead for the first mile and Dick for the second; and thus they continued to change positions throughout the journey, each doing his share of "breaking trail." The sun was up by the time they reached the first trap. It was empty, but had not been tampered with. Between the shack and the edge of the barren they found only one prize — a patch-fox. Now patch-foxes, like black and grey foxes, are freaks; but, unlike the black and the grey, they are not valuable freaks. The skin of a well-marked "patch" may be worth from two to three times that of an ordinary red; whereas the pelts of black and grey run from ten to eighty pounds in value, the black being the more valuable of the two. But the strange part of it is that these are not separate varieties of fox. The common, reddish yellow animal wears the true family coat — the blacks, greys and patches are but freaks. The pelt valued at three dollars and that valued at four hundred dollars may come from animals that were cubbed in the same den. Needless to

say (for the values tell the story), the black and grey freaks do not often "happen."

"Dat a'mighty big pity," said Sober Sam, as he swiftly skinned the fox. "Dis pelt comes pretty near big money. Yes, you bet! It could just as easy bin all black, or all grey, as a little o' both an' some red chucked in. Darn shame, yes."

At the edge of the barren they found that other visitors had been ahead of them. Eager paws had dug the deep, light snow away from the carcass of the caribou. In fact, there was not much of it left except the larger bones and the hoofs. Sam, who had brought one of the traps along with him from further up the line, gazed at the gnawed remains of the stag and nodded his round head.

"Good place, yes," he said. "Plenty fox here, you bet." He set the trap and, without baiting it, placed it close to the wreck of the carcass and covered it lightly with snow.

They were half-way across the barren when Sober Sam, who was in the lead, halted and pointed off to the left. "Look!" he whispered. "Young stag in a'mighty hurry."

Dick looked, shading his eyes from the glare of

the sun — for the sun was shining brightly though the air was bitterly cold. He saw a caribou plunging along, its head thrown far back and the snow rising about it in glittering clouds. It was in a hurry, and no mistake. He turned inquiringly to his companion.

"Wolves, I guess," remarked the Indian.

The stag plunged onward, travelling at a good pace in spite of the depth of the snow, and soon won to the edge of the timber at a point about half a mile in front and to the left of where the trappers stood. Then the wolves came into sight, leaping and sinking and leaping again on the deep trail of the caribou. There were four of them. Dick began to untie the blanket case of his rifle.

Sober Sam noticed the action. "You wait," he said. "We strike dat trail too an' maybe both get good shot at dem timber wolves. You no hit um now, jumpin' like dat."

Dick saw that his companion was right. They turned half-left and reached the trail in a few minutes just where it entered the woods from the open barren. They followed it at the best pace they could manage; but running was out of the question. It was a plain trail but a hard

one to travel. In some places their snow-shoes caught in the tops of buried bushes. Once Dick's right shoe turned sideways under him and sent him sprawling. Sober Sam had to turn and drag him to his feet again. They went up hill and down dale, across hidden streams and beneath wide, snow-weighted branches that spilled their loads upon the trappers' heads. The Indian did not look to be travelling very fast, but he was soon far ahead of poor Dick. He halted at the base of a small hummock and waited for Dick to come up with him.

"You step too high," he said, as the other reached him, puffing heavily. "You chuck yer feet too high. An' you go hop-jump over things an' bang-bump into things. Dat not de way! But we get in sight pretty soon, I guess. Wolves kill pretty soon — in three-four mile, maybe — an' den we get good shot."

Dick nodded (he had no wind to spare for remarks), and on they went. He took Sam's hint as to the high action of the legs and the bumping into things and travelled as nearly as he could after the methods of the red man, avoiding obstacles rather than overcoming them and not lifting his feet an inch higher than was abso-

lutely necessary. In this way he managed to keep within a few yards of his companion. The stag and the wolves led them through some desperately rough country, on a course that bore steadily to the nor'east. Suddenly the Indian halted and held up his left hand. They were behind a dense thicket on the crest of a small knoll. The deep trail of the caribou led straight through the tangled barrier of young spruces and firs. A few slight sounds — a snort and a low snarl — reached the ears of the trappers. Sober Sam nodded to Dick and cleared his old Snider from its case. Dick got his Winchester ready and together they moved cautiously forward. When they got through the thicket they had a clear view down the slope of the hill to the little valley at the bottom. All the way down the slope the deep trail was marked with blood; and in the little valley the big, tawny wolves tore at the lifeless body of the caribou.

The wolves were as large as collies, and long-jawed and long-haired. Their coats varied from reddish brown in one to red and grey in another. One was very light and another showed a good deal of black about the ruff and brush. Their heads were very broad above the eyes. They were

much larger and finer beasts than Dick had imagined wolves to be.

Each selected his victim and the two rifles spoke at the same moment. The beast with the black markings and a splendid big fellow with an even red-brown coat sprang into the air and fell, kicking, in the snow. For a second or two they kicked, and then lay still. The others had vanished like shadows on the very instant of the firing.

By the time the two wolves were deprived of their fine pelts it was a full hour past noon. Dick and Sam were hungry, for they had breakfasted before six and had travelled about seventeen miles since then. And they had not travelled by an easy road. So they made a fire, boiled their kettle and ate bread and cold pork. Neither felt any appetite to try a slice of the wolf-killed caribou. They sat on the wolf skins, close to the fire; and after the meal was finished Sam filled his blackened pipe.

CHAPTER VII

A WRENCHED ANKLE. SOBER SAM'S REMARKABLE DISCOVERY

Sober Sam smoked his pipe for about twenty minutes, silent, staring at the little fire in the snow. He sat cross-legged on one of the fresh wolf skins, and suggested to Dick a good-natured heathen idol carved out of ancient and unpolished mahogany. The cold air was without a breath of wind, and the thin, azure finger of smoke from the dying fire arose as straight as a wand, unbroken until it faded in the upper sunshine. Two big, heavy-headed jays came from somewhere in the depths of the woods, attracted by the sight or scent of the smoke. Screaming discordantly, hopping from branch to branch and making short, awkward flights from tree to tree, they drew nearer and nearer to the fire and the quiet woodsmen. At last they descended within a yard of Dick and each snatched and gulped a fragment of discarded pork fat. Dick tossed them

some more scraps, which they accepted fearlessly and greedily.

"They are wonderfully tame," remarked Dick. "One would think that they are accustomed to human society."

Sober Sam glanced up and nodded his head. "Dat right," he said. "Dem whiskey-jacks a'mighty friendly birds. You go anywhere, I guess, clean up to Hudson Bay, maybe, an' light fire, an' pretty soon one-two-t'ree whiskey-jack come hoppin' an' hollerin' round. An a'mighty good reason, too, you bet."

"And what's the reason?" asked Dick, delighted at having stirred the old man from his reverie.

"Dem whiskey-jacks all got de spirits of trapper in him," said Sam. "Not injun trapper, but 'breed, maybe, or Scotch, or French, or English. Back in Quebec plenty got spirit of lumberman in him. Spirit of good injun trapper don't get into bird — it go smack off to Happy Hunting-Ground, west of de Crimson Wigwam. So dem whiskey-jacks feel a'mighty good when dey sniff smell of fire an' fried bacum. Yes, you bet! Long time, maybe, dey bin eatin' nothin' but bird-food — an' dat all-fired uncomforble grub for

spirit of trapper. So when dey see fire dey come a'mighty quick an' hang round long time, gulpin' an' listenin'. Dey listen now, you bet. See dat ol' feller wink um eye at me."

Dick laughed and dropped several more scraps of pork on the snow. "And what do you think, Sam? Are these chaps possessed of the spirits of half-breed, French, Scotch or English trappers?"

"I guess dat feller dat hop up into tree with biggest lump of pork, him Scotch trapper, Dick; an' dat feller tryin' to poke him head into your pocket, him got English spirit."

Dick laughed heartily. "That's one on me, Sam, for I'm both Scotch and English."

"Dat two on you, den," replied the Indian, grinning broadly. Then he got to his feet, made up his pack and replaced his snow-shoes. "Best move along," he said. "Can't talk an' make joke all day, Dick."

They were soon on the march again, with the wolf skins and some of the flesh of the caribou added to their packs. They meant to use the flesh as bait for the traps. Sober Sam led the way, heading in the direction of the line of traps from which the chase of the wolves and caribou

had drawn them. Sam did not require the help of a compass to find his bearings. A glance at the sky, and a sweeping survey of the woods and hills, were enough for him. They moved forward at a brisk pace, in spite of their previous exertions and the new, unpacked snow. It was rough country — a region of sharp hills, narrow valleys and tangled thickets — through which their course led them; and before they reached their line of traps Dick, while jumping down a steep, snow-pillowed slope, tripped in the tops of some hidden brush. He was thrown forward heavily and buried to his waist in the drift, head-downward; but one of his racquets was twisted sharply and held tight by the brush. As the strain came on his ankle he uttered a yelp of pain. Then he floundered and kicked in the powdery snow, and so made matters much worse. The snow smothered him and the pain in his imprisoned, twisted ankle was like a hot knife-blade in the joint.

Sober Sam dropped his pack at Dick's cry, turned and sprang to his assistance. First of all he lifted his head and shoulders to the surface, and then he leaned back and cut the thong of the twisted racquet and so released the injured foot. Dick was breathless and pale. Sam, who was as

strong as a little horse, lifted him tenderly down to a level spot a few yards distant. He gathered bark and dry branches and soon had a fire blazing. Close to this he placed the sufferer, on a couch of fir boughs, and with deft fingers and ready knife he removed the moccasin and woollen stockings from the throbbing foot. He found the ankle hot and swollen.

"You done um, Dick!" he muttered. "You lay up one-two day, I guess. Dat darn pity, too."

"Oh! It's just a twist," returned Dick, through clenched teeth. "It will be right in an hour or so. Just a bit of a strain, I think."

Sober Sam made an examination of the joint which brought drops of moisture out on Dick's brow. "Dat a'right," he said, at last. "Nothin' broke, I guess. Now me fix um, Dick. Me a'mighty good doctor."

He melted snow at the fire and wet several handsfull of soft moss which he had collected from a tree near-by. This he bound snugly around the ankle, using strips of flannel from the lining of his coat for bandages. Over this bulky dressing he drew the largest of the woollen stockings.

"Hang it all!" exclaimed Dick. "This is beastly hard luck!"

"Not luck so much as you jump too darn careless," returned the other, sorrowfully. "You larn to do him better next time, maybe. You fall down hard like dat in summer-time, an' hit rock 'stead of snow, an' you break your darn neck, I guess. But dat a'right, Dick. Plenty injun I know jes' much big fool as you."

"To hear you jaw," said Dick, smiling in spite of the pain in his ankle, "one would think I'd done the trick on purpose. But what are you up to now, Sam?"

"Make camp an' get heap of wood," replied the other. "Den light out for shack an' get grub an' lin'ment. No good to move you for one-two day."

Dick did not relish the prospect of the "one-two" days of helplessness so casually mentioned by his companion. He believed "one-two" days to be a very vague period of time. Now in a comfortable bed, or in an easy-chair by a cheery hearth, with plenty of books to read, the thing might not be so bad; but in the heart of the winter wilderness, alone most of the time (for traps must be attended to), with a hole in the snow for bed

and the frozen sky and crowding spruces for book, it promised to be dull. And a still more unpleasant thought came to him. Suppose the Thing, whatever it was, that cried so terrifically in the night, should find him when he was alone and helpless on his back?

Sober Sam worked quickly and soon had Dick propped comfortably on a couch of fir boughs, deep and springy, with a heap of wood close at hand to keep the fire supplied for many hours. Beside the stack of fuel he placed Dick's rifle. Close to the fire he set the kettle and frying-pan; and, after a moment's hesitation, he placed beside them the flesh that had been intended for bait. He planned, of course, to be back in a few hours with plenty of food; but, having spent a lifetime in the wilderness he was not such a fool as to be too sure of anything.

Three hours dragged slowly away, bringing nothing to disturb or entertain Dick save two whiskey-jacks. Dick wondered if these were the same couple of trappers that had visited them a few miles away. They attacked his caribou meat with the energy and greed of those great nations to which Sam had assigned the other birds, and he was forced to shy sticks at them to keep them

away. Another hour passed and twilight, red and level out of the west, began to creep around him. A hare, white as the snow, fled across the little clearing. Three more whiskey-jacks joined the first couple. A red fox appeared, for a second, at the edge of the bush, on the trail of the hare, and vanished as silently and swiftly as the winking of an eye. Darkness flooded the wilderness and the cold stars glinted above the spires of spruce and fir and the strong, black towers of the pines. An owl passed close overhead, like a white shadow, noiseless as smoke.

Dick fed the fire with a generous hand, driving back the shadows with the red and yellow glow of it. Unwelcome memories of that other night that he had spent in the snow, when those frightful, indescribable cries had chilled his blood, came to him with daunting vividness. He drew his rifle to his knees and snapped a shell into the breech.

"I hope that night didn't make a coward of me," he muttered.

Suddenly he became conscious of two yellow-green sparks, motionless and low down, shining weirdly from the black shadows beyond the circle of firelight. The discovery gave him a shock,

brief but disquieting. Then he realized, by their proximity to the snow, that they must be the eyes of some animal and not of the nameless thing that he feared. He sat very still, watching those sparks of pale, yellow-green flame. At last they shifted a little, a foot or two to the left. He wondered if they belonged to lynx, fox, wolf or wolverine, or to what other hunter of the night. Needless to say, he felt no fear; for he could not think of any animal of those parts that would venture to attack a man beside a fire.

"It doubtless possesses a good pelt, whatever it is," he reflected. "It is worth a try, anyway."

He raised his rifle; but before his eye could find the sights the watchful sparks had vanished. He kept very quiet for ten or fifteen minutes, with his rifle ready, thumb on hammer and finger on trigger; but the yellow-green eyes did not show themselves again. He put more wood on the fire, and presently he dozed. He was disturbed by something — the suggestion of a swift, noiseless movement at his elbow — and opening his eyes and turning quick as a flash he saw that the larger of the two lumps of caribou flesh had vanished. He was startled, but interested. The daring and skill of the thief touched his admira-

tion. He reached forward, pulled a blazing stick from the fire, and by its light examined the snow beside, where the great lump of frozen meat had so recently been. He found a distinct trail in the soft snow, but a trail that he could not read, for it was evident that the animal that had made it had dragged itself forward on its belly. Then a disquieting thought came to him. Might not a human being make just such a trail, crawling flat? He shifted his position a little, so that he could keep his eye on the darkness behind him.

After another half-hour of anxious waiting, Dick heard Sober Sam's welcome shout. Five minutes later Sam appeared beside him and lowered a pack consisting of provisions and two sleeping-bags to the snow.

"You were away a long time," said Dick. "Anything the matter?"

"T'ief in de shack, dat all," replied Sam, impassively.

"A thief! Do you mean that a bear broke in? — or what kind of thief are you talking about?" asked Dick, nervously.

The old woodsman seated himself close to the fire and began to unpack the things he had brought

from the shack. "Maybe b'ar, maybe not b'ar," he said. "B'ar's tracks, a'right; but he shut door behind jes' like man. He take some ham, some tea an' some sugar, an' don't spill nothin' on de floor."

"A man! Of course it was a man!" exclaimed Dick. "But what do you mean about a bear's tracks?"

Sam smiled. "Mean marks of b'ar's feet go right up to shack an' away again — an' no marks of man's feet at all."

"That beats me!" admitted Dick.

"Maybe man, maybe b'ar — but most like it spirit of dat Pierre," said Sam. "Spirits can do most anything, Dick. Smart trick to walk like ol' b'ar, you bet."

Dick tried to argue the old man out of his absurd belief, but had to give it up. "That's the spirit I'm after," he said, when he at last gave up the argument. "It's the same spirit that raised my hair with its cries one night, and cut off the caribou steak with a sharp knife. I think that a bullet will stop the fooling of a spirit that steals ham and tea."

"You darn smart feller, Dick," returned the other. "You catch dat spirit some day, I guess,

an' shoot him — 'less he yell like he done before an' scare you too bad."

Dick was silent for a moment; but presently he said, "A thief visited me, too. Just take a look at these marks, Sam. I can't make them out."

Sam possessed himself with a torch from the fire and examined the queer trail in the snow with interest. He even followed it back into the woods for fifteen or twenty yards.

"Dat big painter," he said. "Big mountain cat with long tail, not like lynx. A'mighty bad feller, dat painter! He big as two lynx, I guess. Don't see many 'round dis country. Live up in big hills mostly. Darn glad he didn't jump atop of you, Dick."

"So am I," said Dick; but he was greatly relieved to learn that his silent visitor had been nothing more unusual and unexplainable than a mountain panther. Sam bathed the injured ankle with liniment, helped the sufferer into his sleeping-bag, and gathered more wood for the fire.

"I am not sleepy," said Dick. "Better fill your pipe, Sam, and tell me what we are going to do about that thief. Spirit or bear or man, we can't afford to let it carry off our grub."

"Set two trap for him, anyhow, under snow outside door," replied Sam. "If he b'ar, good enough. If he man, maybe catch him too. If he spirit of Pierre Lacross — well, dat a'right. Guess he won't t'ief no more to-night, anyhow."

Dick awoke next morning to find that the sunlight was already flooding low through the eastern forests and that breakfast was ready. Sam was smoking his pipe, with empty plate and mug in front of him. He brought bacon, biscuits and tea to Dick and then undressed and examined his ankle again. The swelling was considerably reduced. "Guess you move tomorrow, a'right," he said. Then he slipped his feet into the thongs of his racquets and took up his rifle.

"Are you going to leave me alone all day?" asked Dick.

Sam nodded. "Got to tend traps east of the pond, Dick — an' squint at shack, I guess. I catch dat queer b'ar in one trap, maybe."

"So you don't really think it is Pierre Lacross, after all," said Dick, quickly. "You are not such a fool as you pretend to be, Sam."

"Oh! I t'ink plenty you don't understand," returned the old fellow, grinning. "If I catch dat t'ief in trap den I say him no spirit."

"That's reasonable," said Dick, laughing. "But see here, Sam, get back as early as you can, will you? This is not a pleasant country to sleep alone in, with such queer kinds of thieves prowling about in it."

CHAPTER VIII

MORE SIGNS OF THE QUEER THIEF

Dick spent a tiresome day, with only the whiskey-jacks and his thoughts for company. Sam had left enough wood to keep the fire supplied, and he managed to get his own simple dinner without standing on his lame foot. He saw nothing more of the mountain panther. However, greatly to his relief and surprise, Sober Sam returned early in the afternoon.

"Pretty darn queer tricks!" exclaimed the old man. "Last night both t'iefs come to shack — both de painter an' de b'ar. De tracks run side by side, right up to door an' away again."

"Great Scot!" cried Dick. "A panther and a bear hunting together! I never heard anything like that before."

"Me too. Darn queer tricks."

"And what about the traps?"

"Traps dug up an' sprung — an' hung up inside de shack."

"Bless my soul! The place must be bewitched."

" A'mighty strong medicine-man 'round here, anyhow. You bet! "

Dick was bewildered and his nerve was somewhat shaken. The thought of a panther and a bear hunting together and springing traps and hanging them up in the shack was too much even for his courage and hard head. It was almost enough to make even an Englishman believe in spirits and the magic of medicine-men.

" Did they take much, this time? " he asked.

" Queer t'ing, dat," replied Sam, scratching his hairless, mahogany chin. " Nothin' stole but some baccy, and someone drink a mug of tea."

" Do bears drink tea and smoke? or do panthers? or do spirits? "

Sam shook his head. " Medicine-man drink tea and smoke, an' turn himself into b'ar whenever he he like — if he got mighty potent medicine."

" And what about an ordinary man? " asked Dick. " Didn't you see any ordinary man-tracks around the shack? "

" No. Follow dat b'ar's tracks most two mile, I guess; an' den got kinder scart an' quit. Dat medicine too a'mighty strong for Sam. Guess we shift camp into nother country pretty soon, Dick."

"Guess again," returned Dick, making use of an expression he had learned at Wolf's Landing. He stared moodily at the fire. This was a good fur-country, and he did not relish the idea of making a move of fifty or a hundred miles, in mid-winter, perhaps into a poorer country. But if robbers possessed of the feet of wild beasts and the brains and fingers of men persisted in taking toll of his provisions and his traps, there would be nothing else for it but a change of ground — unless the strange thief, or thieves, could be brought to book.

"Honestly, Sam, did you ever see a medicine-man?" he asked.

"Yes. A'mighty good medicine-man up in Long Arrow country, ten year ago. Dat one had plenty strong magic, Dick. Skin-um-mink was his name."

"Could he turn himself into a bear?"

"Yes, you bet! Or into a little chickadee-bird, too."

"Did you ever see him turn into either a bear or a bird?"

Sam shook his head. "No. He wouldn't do it when anyone was lookin'."

"Sam," said Dick, earnestly, "we must keep

cool. This is a good country, and we don't want to leave it unless we jolly well have to. The sooner we track down that thing that walks like a bear and drinks tea like a man, and learn exactly what it is, the better for us and our business. It takes pretty strong magic, you know, to beat a well handled rifle."

"Maybe so, Dick," replied Sam. "Anyhow, we go look for dat t'ief soon as you can walk. Maybe we find out all about him — an' all about dat painter, too."

The old man spoke hopefully; but the belief that they were being preyed upon by a bad medicine-man of strong magic was firm in his mind. In the days of his youth his old grandmother had told him hundreds of tales of the doings of bad medicine-men — not as fairy stories but as authentic history. His own great-grandfather had been a medicine-man of more than local fame and (according to the old dame's story) had ended his career in a most unusual and distressing manner. His favourite amusement had been to run about in the form of a little hare; and, one day, while indulging in this diversion, a hunter had shot him with an arrow and, a few hours later, eaten him for supper. Sober Sam

believed this tale; so it is not to be wondered at that he felt anxious and did not want to investigate the mystery of the thief until Dick could join him in the adventure. He said that he had followed the tracks of the bear for a distance of two miles from the shack. It had seemed two miles to him, no doubt; but it had really been a trifle less than half a mile.

Sober Sam kept Dick company in the open that night, frankly admitting that he was afraid to sleep alone in the shack. The night passed without accident or excitement of any kind, and early in the morning they set out for the shack. The swelling had almost entirely gone from Dick's ankle, though it was still very tender — too tender to allow of the foot being touched to the ground. Sam made a rough sort of crutch and fastened one of the racquets to the end of it. By the help of this, and with the other racquet on his uninjured foot, Dick found that he could move slowly along his companion's well beaten trail. So they set out, Sam leading and carrying both rifles and every pound of the kit. Dick pegged along like a hero; but after covering half a mile in an hour he was forced to call a halt. A home-made crutch with a snow-shoe on the end

of it is not an easy thing for a lame man to manipulate. After a half-hour's rest he went at it again. It was mid-afternoon when the shack was reached; and by that time Dick was fairly done. Sam helped him off with his outer clothing and tucked him away in his bunk.

Three days passed before Dick could again bear his weight on his left foot. During those three days and nights no further signs of either the bear or the panther had appeared. On the third night after Dick's painful journey snow fell heavily. So Dick kept to the shack for another day and again Sam went out alone to attend to the traps. The old man took a kettle and grub with him, for he expected to go to the western line and not get back until after sunset. Dick busied himself with mending his clothes and stretching pelts until after dinner-time. After cooking and eating liberal rations of pork and pan-cakes, and topping off with stewed prunes, he climbed into his bunk and fell asleep.

Dick was not a heavy sleeper. Suddenly he opened his eyes, all his senses instantly alert. He lay very still, wondering what had awakened him. He was sure that he had heard something, and yet not so much as an echo of the sound re-

mained with him. Presently he got noiselessly from his bunk, took his rifle from the wall and went over to the tiny window. He looked out and by the failing light could see nothing but the level, pallid snow and the black spruces. Then he went to the door, withdrew the wooden bolt and cautiously opened it. Greatly to his relief, nothing was there. He pulled the door of rough-hewn planks wide open and stepped outside. "Now what was it that wakened me?" he murmured. "I must have heard something."

At that moment, as if in answer to his question, the sharp report of a rifle cracked out, somewhere in the woods to the north and not far away. Then he felt sure that the sound that had awakened him had been the report of a rifle.

"Surely Sam can't have lost himself," he reflected. "By the sound of that shot I should say that he must be within a few yards of the lake."

He drew a dog-whistle from his pocket and blew a shrill blast. Then he waited by the open door; and in a few minutes Sober Sam appeared, running heavily. Dick stepped aside, and Sam entered the shack at full speed, with his snow-shoes still on his feet, swung around as fast as he could and slammed and bolted the door.

"Great Scot!" cried Dick, "what is the matter with you?"

The old man dropped his rifle, kicked his racquets from his feet and flopped down on the edge of his bunk. He was breathless, and his round face was rather less the shade of old mahogany than usual. He could not speak for a minute or two. This gave Dick quite a turn. He went over to the old chap and patted him on the back.

"Are you ill?" he asked. "By Jove! Sam, you don't look at all fit. Are you hurt? Are you ill? And what the mischief were you sniping at?"

"Hol' on," gasped Sam. "You ax questions too darn quick."

After a while he said, "I get a'mighty big scar' Dick. I see some darn queer things. Hark! what's dat noise?"

Dick listened. "I don't hear anything," he said. "You are rattled!"

Sam crossed to the little window and peeped cautiously out; but by now it was almost dark and his vision did not carry more than a few yards from the shack. He moved over to the door, stood for a minute with his ear to the

crack, then opened it an inch or two. Dick joined him. "Look here, Sam, what in thunder is the matter with you?" he asked, thoroughly anxious about his companion's behaviour.

Sam closed and fastened the door and returned to his seat on the edge of his bunk. "Guess it didn't foller me," he said. He filled his pipe, lit it and the smoky lantern with one match, and then told of the following remarkable adventures.

On leaving the shack early that morning, Sam had intended to follow the western line of traps; but, at a whim, he had changed his course and travelled northward instead. The northward line ran along the left-hand bank of the lake for about three miles, rounded the top of the pond and led back to the shack by way of the right-hand shore. Through a shortage of traps only seven were set on this line — about one to every mile. It was a good country, too, and fairly easy to travel. Sam reached the first trap, only to find that a wolverine had taken the bait and got safely away. Grunting his disgust, he hung the trap in a tree, intending to reset and rebait it next day. As he could not find the tracks of the wolverine he knew that the trap had been visited previous to

the snow-fall of the night. The second trap had the bait still in it. That did not please him greatly, for he would rather have found a mink, or even a red fox. Tramping onward, he soon came to the low-lying, tangled country at the head of the lake. This region was a swamp in summer, full of sodden hummocks of moss, pools of black and stagnant water, thickets of alders and spruce-tuck, with the grey boles of water-killed hemlocks and pines standing here and there in desolate groups. The place was never inviting, summer or winter, spring or autumn; but in winter, when the black pools were floored with ice and shrouded deep with snow, a man could travel it with comparative ease, and it promised good fur.

Sam had set two traps in the swamp, and he entered it with high hopes of mink. Following certain guiding marks, he soon came to the place that he had selected for the nearer of the two traps. But he could not find it. Thinking he had made a mistake, he retraced his steps for fifty yards or so, picked out his land-marks again and made another try. It brought him to the same spot. He was puzzled, for the trap had been chained to a solid root far beneath the snow.

He tramped around and around, beating the bushes; but he could not find so much as a sign of that trap. At last he gave it up as a bad job and went on to examine the other. He found the place where he had set it easily enough; but that was all. This trap, like the other, had vanished. Sam beat the thickets, dug about in the snow, stared up into the branches of the trees; but he might just as well have saved himself the trouble. Then he began to wonder if he had ever set the traps in the swamp at all. Perhaps he had only dreamed it. Or perhaps his mind was going wrong. At last he sat down on a fallen hemlock, pulled out his pipe and lit it, and tried to cool his mind and think it all out. He smoked and thought for fifteen minutes, and at the end of that time found himself no wiser than at the beginning. At last he knocked the ashes out of his pipe and got to his feet — and then he heard something that made his scalp tickle under his fur cap. A shrill, long-drawn screaming yell rang through the frozen air.

For a moment Sam was fairly staggered, thinking of spirits and medicine-men, for there was no doubt in his mind that this was the same cry that had given Dick such a fright away over at

the edge of the western barren. Again the terrible voice shattered the quiet of the wilderness; and now the grip of fear left Sam's tough old heart, for he recognized it as the voice of the painter, or mountain panther. It was years since he had seen or heard one of these big cats. He had never before known one of them to visit the Little Beaver country. He snapped a shell into the breech of his rifle and continued on his way; but he "kept his eye skinned," as they say in the woods. Unusually hungry and courageous painters have been known to drop out of trees upon men's shoulders, just as they do upon the necks of deer and caribou. So the old trapper kept a sharp lookout on every side and overhead as he forced his way through the tangled thickets. Again he heard the cry, still in front of him but much nearer. Twenty minutes later he won clear of the swamp. Here the land was higher, the trees were larger and stood farther apart, and such little underbrush as there was lay buried beneath the long, gradual drifts of snow.

Sam halted and gazed in every direction, hoping to catch a glimpse of the big cat. But it was nowhere in sight.

"Too darn bad," he muttered. "Like to

shoot him fust-rate. A'mighty fine skin, maybe, an' Gover'ment bounty too."

A glance at the sun told him that the hour was well past noon, so he built his fire, filled his kettle with snow to melt for his tea, and made a comfortable seat of fir boughs. It was a pleasant place to lunch in and rest for an hour, and there was just a chance that the panther might hang around, attracted by the smell of frying pork, and even show himself. So while Sam fried the pork and steeped the tea he kept his eyes moving and his rifle in his left hand. And while he ate his simple fare his rifle lay ready across his knees.

CHAPTER IX

SOBER SAM'S ADVENTURE IS CONTINUED

Sober Sam ate in peace, without being disturbed by sight or sound of the panther. After the fourth slice of pork and the fourth mug of milkless tea, he cleaned the empty dishes with snow and placed them close to the fire to dry. Then he lit his pipe and leaned back comfortably on his couch of elastic branches. He was still puzzling over the case of the two traps that had vanished from the swamp; but his mind was somewhat clouded by the weight of pork and tea in his stomach. Like many of his race Sam was inclined to feast too heartily when plenty of food was at hand. In the time of famine he could pull in his belt with the best of them.

For about fifteen minutes Sam reclined on his back, gazing straight up at the thin, fleckless blue sky. Then he turned over on his right elbow, perhaps to shift the position of his mighty dinner. His vision carried far among the tall, wide-standing trees, over the white levels of snow.

There seemed to be no life at all in the wilderness — no cry or movement of bird or beast. The frosty sunlight sifted down through the spreading branches of spruce, pine and fur, and traced pale blue shadows on the snow.

"Darn fine country," murmured Sam; "but can't t'ink what's de trouble with dem traps. Dat beats me all t'ell, you bet!"

Just then the stillness was broken by a chuckling laugh. Yes, a laugh — an unpleasant, clattering chuckle. Sam sat straight up, as if a spring had been touched inside him. He raised his rifle and stared about him with amazed and frightened eyes. Again he felt all the hairs of his head tingle at their roots, as if every last one of them was trying to pull itself away from the scalp. A human laugh is a terrible sound to hear in an unpeopled wilderness — unexpected, unexplained, unprovoked.

"Must be some kinder bird," gasped Sam, in a cracked voice. But he did not really think so. The uncanny laughter had sounded from straight ahead and not far away; but Sam could not see anything. He got quietly to his feet, tied on his racquets with trembling fingers and, forgetting his dishes, started slowly along the back trail

with his chin on his shoulder. He had not gone more than a dozen yards, however, before something — a soundless warning tingling through the air and touching his brain — caused him to look ahead. There, crossing his trail like a tawny shadow, slipped the big panther. Its head was turned toward the old trapper and its pale, merciless eyes met his with a steady, flaming, derisive regard. Sam halted, and terror went over him like a wave of icy water — terror at the thought that this big cat and the unseen creature that had laughed were one and the same. They must be one and the same! — a master of magic! For a second of two he stared at the panther and the panther glared back unblinkingly; then, moving swiftly but without any effort at haste, it vanished among the trees.

Sam was in a terrible funk. He was not a coward, and would have stood up to three bona fide, guaranteed panthers without turning a hair — that is, without turning a hair of his own. What he might do to the hairs and hides of the panthers, in such a case, is more than I can say. But of magic, medicine-men and spirits he stood in deadly terror. He moved forward, shaking and stumbling, afraid to run and just as much afraid

of going too slowly. All the weird stories that he had ever heard crowded into his quaking mind.

Suddenly that terrible laughter rang out again — and it was still behind him!

Sam turned so quickly that he fouled one racquet with the other and so brought himself heavily to his knees. This threw him in an absolute panic and he uttered a horror-stricken cry as he struggled to his feet. He was facing in the direction of the laugh now — and far away between the ranks of trees he saw something large and black standing straight, motionless and bulky among the shadows. It had a menacing, unnatural look about it; but the nearer glare of sunlight on snow and the farther twilight of twisted shadows bothered Sam's eyes so that he could not be sure whether the thing was a man, a beast or some grotesque stump. But fear had driven reason from his mind. Scarcely knowing what he did he raised his rifle and fired. It was a wild shot — perhaps the wildest he had ever made in all his long life. He saw one of the lower branches of a fir quake and spill its load of snow. That was all the good he had accomplished by that mad shot. And now the thing among the

shadows moved forward, walking upright like a man. Sam turned again and ran at top speed.

Sam kept to his old trail, though he was scarcely conscious of it. At the edge of the swamp the panther slipped across a little clearing in front of him, about fifty yards away. He let fly, without bringing the rifle to his shoulder or halting for an instant. That shot was even wider than the first. The panther vanished and that terrible laughter rang again in the forest behind. Sam did not turn his head, but continued to race forward at top speed, leaping obstructions like a champion hurdler. The new, unpacked snow lodged on his broad racquets; but he shook it clear as he ran. He was winged by fear, for he was sure by now that two magicians instead of one were after him.

Sam was half-way through the swamp before his pace slackened. He was utterly winded, and all the bad magic between Quebec and Hudson Bay could not have got another jump out of him just then. He dropped to his knees and panted like a dog. He was sound of wind and limb, however, and in a minute was on his feet again. Shut in by the lifeless, tangled growth of the swamp, he could not see for more than a few yards

in any direction. He glanced nervously around, snapped a shell from the magazine into the breech of his rifle, and started on again at a lively jog. He was anxious to get out of the swamp as soon as possible. He kept his neck on the twist, dreading an ambush or a rear attack, and had not made more than a hundred yards before he saw the panther leap into the trail about twenty feet behind him. Twisting around from the hips, without turning his feet, he fired. The bullet snipped into the snow where the panther had stood. The big cat was a quick jumper. Sam raced onward at a greatly accelerated pace.

At last Sam reached the more open forest beyond the swamp, jogged to the brow of a little hill and turned to see if anything followed. Also, he wanted to recover his wind again, for running through the woods on racquets, in new-fallen snow, is not the same sport as loping along a cinder track. Neither of his terrible pursuers was in sight. Through the trees on his left he saw the wide, white expanse of Two-Fox Pond, and it occurred to him that there lay his safest road home. Once on the lake, he would command a clear and expansive view in every direction. He was just out of the underbrush and had his

feet on the level surface, when that diabolical laughter sounded again, but now a long distance to the rear. It was near enough, however, to send the old trapper forward on the jump. He was a good fifty yards from the shore before he looked behind him. Seeing nothing, he shaped his course for the upper end of the pond, walking at a good pace.

Sober Sam had not covered more than a mile of the distance between the head of the lake and the shack when he again caught sight of the panther. It was running level with him, just at the edge of the heavy timber that rimmed the lake. Sam halted and brought his rifle to his shoulder; but a little clot of snow fouled the fore-sight. Muttering an oath, he lowered the weapon and quickly brushed the snow away with his left hand; but the panther had noticed his preparations and leapt out of sight among the trees. Anger tinged the old trapper's fear. "You seem a'mighty scart of a rifle!" he snarled. and fired at the spot where the beast had vanished. He snapped another cartridge into the breech and waited. His fear of the panther had dwindled, and so had his respect for it, for anyone possessed of real, potent magic would be proof against

bullets; but the thought of the bulky, black thing that looked like a bear and laughed like a man still daunted his tough old heart. "Guess I wait few minutes," he muttered. "Guess I try one more shot at dat darn painter."

Now he began to feel the effects of his wild run, so he squatted on his racquets and smoked his pipe, keeping his face toward the wall of forest behind which he believed the big cat to be lurking. The tobacco tasted good and the rest was very welcome. Ten minutes passed, twenty minutes passed — and then, as sudden and quick as a flash of light, the panther sprang from cover, screamed derisively and sprang back again. Sam was so astonished at this meaningless and unnatural antic that he almost lost his balance and forgot to fire. He was so angry when he recovered his balance and self-possession that the thing that laughed like a man was forgotten.

"Dat painter one darn fool," he muttered. "He t'ink he scar' me dat time, I guess. Maybe I scar' him instead — if he give me good chance. He come too darn suddent dat time; but no yellin' painter can fool Sober Sam twice in de same day."

So he continued to wait, crouching in the snow on his broad racquets and gazing at the woods.

"IT WAS ADVANCING, WALKING UPRIGHT LIKE A MAN."

For a long time he remained as motionless as a stump; and then, suddenly and with a twinge of consternation, he realized that the early twilight was gathering over the wilderness. He straightened himself with a jerk. "Guess I better not wait any more," he said — and at that moment he caught sight of something big and black on the snow at the edge of the woods. It was advancing, walking upright like a man, its great arms extended. Even in the failing light his horrified gaze showed him that its head, limbs and bulky body were those of a bear. Forgetting to use his rifle he turned toward the lower end of the lake — and just then that terrible laughter rang abroad. Uttering a low cry, he dashed away. Another volley of laughter followed him. Over the level surface of the pond he ran as he had never run before. All his anger had fled and he was inspired by nothing but unmixed terror. He had made about five hundred yards when he became aware of the long, slinking form of the panther in front of him. He fired, still running at full speed and without pretending to take aim, and the panther sprang away to the cover of the woods. That was the shot that awakened Dick from his nap.

As Sam neared the lower end of the lake he fired again, hysterically, though neither of his tormentors was in sight. A few minutes later he reached the shack, breathless, dashed in with his snow-shoes still on his feet and slammed and bolted the door behind him.

Dick Ramsey listened to the old trapper's story with the deepest interest and, at first, with decided quakings of apprehension. But as the story progressed he began to think that he saw through the black magic, or bad medicine, or what ever it was. He had a keen mind, and his wits had not been shaken like poor old Sam's. At the conclusion of the tale he felt convinced that he could explain the whole thing — to his own satisfaction, at least.

"That panther," said he, "is just an ordinary panther, and the same one that stole the caribou meat from me the other night. There is no doubt about it."

"Darn smart one, anyhow! Smartest painter I ever see," returned Sam.

"And the thing that looked like a bear and laughed like a man, is a man," continued Dick. "Also, it is the same man that robbed our traps and used to make round holes in the snow when it

walked. Now it makes tracks like a bear — sometimes, at least — but for all that he is the same sly fellow who has been bothering us, and trying to drive us out of the country, ever since we began work. He is no more a medicine-man than I am — I'll bet my hat on that! He is nothing but a clever, mean robber!"

"He look just like b'ar," said Sam, "and he make b'ar's tracks a'right. He walk like b'ar 'round de shack, an' sometime he walk like man."

"He was dressed up," said Dick. "That is the only thing in which he resembles one of your blessed old medicine-men. At first — when we first saw signs of him — he wore those silly, round, pot-lid snow-shoes all the time; but now he puts on his bear-skin when he wants to take a rise out of us. And I don't believe he really owns that skin, either — I believe it belongs to us. Do you remember the bear you found in the dead-fall, without any hide on him?"

"You darn smart feller, Dick," returned Sam, "so maybe you tell me what dat b'ar an' dat painter hunt together for, just like two partners, if dey be nothin' but one ordin'ry man an' one ordin'ry painter, an' don't have no a'mighty strong magic to help 'em?"

Dick was puzzled by the question, though he tried not to show it. "That was just a coincidence," he said. "The panther just happened to be there, and was interested in you on his own account."

Sober Sam snorted. "Den why didn't he hunt dat other feller? — de man like a b'ar — an' leave me alone? Tell me dat, will you? You a'mighty smart feller, Dick, but you all wrong now. Dat painter an' dat ol' b'ar be partners, an' have mighty strong magic in 'em, too. De b'ar has, anyhow."

"Don't worry about the magic!" cried Dick. "You talk like a child! That is a man, I tell you, and the other thing is a panther. They may be partners, for all I know; but a bullet would let the magic out of either of them. It is a pity that you were so frightened. If your head was not so full of those cock-and-bull stories we might be skinning that panther now. I wish I had been there. I rather think I should have made them both hop a bit."

"Like you done to dat bull moose," returned Sam, quietly.

"Oh! I made him hop," laughed Dick.

A smile flickered across the old trapper's dusky

face — just flickered and was gone in a second. "Joke mighty fine t'ing at right time," he said, "but dis ain't right time, I guess. All right for to say how you made dat painter and dat other t'ing hop, maybe, when you shoot at 'em; but all de time we get robbed of pelts an' traps an' grub. If dey not any kinder medicine-man, an' you not scart of 'em, Dick, you best go out pretty quick an' make 'em hop clean out of dis here country — or you an' me 'll have to hop out ourselves."

"Of course I will go after them," said Dick. "But I think we'd better hunt them together. My ankle is not quite in shape for a hard tramp yet; but as soon as it is I'll get after that chap who is trying to frighten us away. I'll find his tracks and follow them right to headquarters."

"Dat a'right, Dick. You can't chase 'em out a minute too quick to suit me," replied Sam. "Never knowed afore how it felt like to be real scart. Don't like it, neither. Guess we got to shift camp, Dick, 'less dat ol' b'ar dat laugh like a man shif' first."

For all Dick's big talk, he did not sleep very soundly that night. As for poor Sam, he did not even pretend to sleep but sat bolt upright in his

bunk until morning, with all his clothes on and his rifle ready. At the first break of dawn he left his bunk and went to the window. More snow had fallen during the night, and slow, broad flakes were still circling down. By this time Dick had fallen into a heavy sleep; so Sam moved noiseless about, trying to divert his mind with house-work. He started a roaring fire on the hearth, folded the blankets in his bunk, trimmed the wick of the lantern and put an extra polish on the tin plates and mugs. He knew, all the time, that what he really should do was go down to the hole at the edge of the pond, with axe and bucket, and get water. He put on his moccasins and once even got so far as to withdraw the bolt of the door — but then fear of that bulky medicine-man overcame him. The arguments of his companion had rolled off his superstitious mind as drops of water roll off the wings of a loon. He had seen a bear and a panther hunting in company! — and if that is not a sign and a proof of black, potent magic, what is? The sky brightened to pale grey; and still he could not quite make up his mind to leave the shack. But water was required. At last he went over to Dick's bunk and laid his hand on the youth's shoulder. Dick

jumped up, quick as thought, and grabbed him by the throat.

"Hi! You quit!" yelled Sam.

Then Dick opened his eyes, stared vaguely around, and blushed at last. "I beg pardon, Sam," he stammered, "but it's your own fault. I was dreaming about that beastly medicine-man of yours. He was making for me, on his hind legs — and when he got me by the shoulder with one paw I went for his throat."

"So you scart too," said Sam.

"Not on your life!" exclaimed Dick.

"Den you go get some water," returned the old tribesman.

CHAPTER X

TRAPPERS' LUCK. THE MOOSE-YARD. THE BULL-MOOSE AND THE PANTHER

THE trappers did not go far a-field on the day following Sober Sam's nerve-shattering adventure. The old woodsman, who had faced a thousand risks of flood and forest, frost and hunger, during his long and hard life in the wilds of the north, seemed actually weakened by his experience of the previous evening. He looked ill and jumped at every sound. Dick tried to laugh him out of his fears; but laughter proved to be as useless as argument. So he told the old man that he needed a rest — that the hard run had knocked him out. At last Sam consented to retire to his bunk and be waited upon. Dick got in the day's and night's supply of wood, brought water up from the hole in the ice of the pond, and did all the cooking. Between these jobs he worked at such pelts as required handling and tried to cheer Sam with stories of his old home in England and of his life at school. He tramped around the shack half a

dozen times and twice went for a considerable distance into the woods, but failed to discover any trace of the mysterious poachers. By the time supper was ready Sam's spirits were improved. This was partly owing to Dick's stories, no doubt, but mostly to the fact that the terrible pursuers had not ventured to follow him all the way to the shack. So he ate his supper with something like his old appetite, and afterwards smoked his pipe and told some amusing tales of his own past.

The night passed without alarm. Sam was still feeling a trifle "jumpy" in the morning, so Dick went out alone to attend to the nearer traps. He promised not to go far or be absent long. He took the westward line, and as his old trail was hidden he had to move slowly. He was not yet an expert woodsman and found a good deal of difficulty in detecting his landmarks. One tree looked very much like another to him. But here and there he had "blazed" the way with an axe, and so managed to find the whereabouts of the traps without much loss of time. The first trap was empty; the second contained a lynx, frozen as stiff as wood; and in the third he found that which sent his blood racing madly through his

veins. It was a fox — a big fox, in perfect condition — and its fur was as black as night. In other words, it was the prize of which northern trappers dream and tell wonderful stories — *a black fox*. Dick trembled with excitement as he freed the dead body from the jaws of the trap; and then, without waiting to reset the trap, he turned and started for the shack, eager to let Sam know of this stroke of good fortune.

The sight of that fox, the pelt of which might bring them any sum from three hundred to seven hundred dollars, went a long way toward bringing Sober Sam to himself. In the northern wilderness — or in some parts of it, at least — the taking of a black fox is supposed to mean more good luck than just the sum of money it may represent. Sam believed this firmly and so felt that the Fates were taking a hand in the game and meant to play against the bad medicine-man that had been bothering him of late. He clapped Dick on the back and called him a mighty trapper, embraced the stiff and unconscious fox and then set about depriving it of its valuable coat in the most scientific manner. "Dick, we done fine job a'ready," he said as he worked over the fox. "I see plenty catches for whole season not so

good as we got a'ready. Some bar, some lynx, some bob-cat, six sable, ten ermine, plenty mink, plenty red fox, two patch an' one black fox. A'mighty big money we make, Dick, if we get him all out safe in de spring-time. Guess we stay in dis country 'till we get kicked right out."

Dick was delighted to see the change in his companion. He remained in the shack until after dinner and then set out again, to do a couple of hours of trap-tending. He struck westward again, to take up the same line where he had left off. Making a short cut, he passed through some country that was entirely new to him. In a forest of thick, mixed timber, situated not more than a mile and a half from the shack, he came upon a well beaten trail that cut deep into the snow. A glance told him that it had been made by moose. He followed it for fifty yards and found that another trail of the same kind crossed it at a slant; and, still following, he soon came to a place where a dozen or more deep-pitted trails crossed and recrossed each other, and where, here and there, great patches of snow had been beaten down as smooth as the surface of a winter hauling-road — in other words, not much smoother than a ploughed field. It was a moose-yard of large proportions,

and the first he had seen. He noticed that the lower branches of the trees in and around the centre of the yard had been stripped of every twig, and this explained to him the absence of the moose. He crawled into a thicket of bushy young firs, to wait and watch, hoping to see the owners of the yard and learn something of their habits. Also, he was interested in fresh moose-meat; but he did not intend to scatter the herd or family that made up the yard by shooting any member of it in the immediate vicinity. He would study them, and look them over, if he got the chance; and in a day or so he would lie in ambush on one of the outer trails.

Twenty minutes passed before Dick was rewarded for his patience by any sign of the great animals. At last he heard a sound that suggested the walking of a heavy man, shod with hard boots, on the packed snow. A big cow appeared, walked slowly around one of the beaten patches, sniffed the snow here and there and the stubby branches from which the twigs had been torn, and then lay down with a grunt. She had evidently fed well in the outlying pastures of the forest. A young bull soon came into sight — a yearling, by its size and appearance. It seemed to be in a frolic-

some mood, pranced awkwardly about for a full minute and then raced away. Dick waited a little while longer, hoping for further developments. Nothing more came to the centre of the yard, however, and the intense cold began to gnaw at his motionless limbs; so he started to work his way, backwards, out of the thicket. At the very first movement that he made the big cow came up on her feet like a flash and turned her great head and small black eyes on the thicket. It seemed to Dick that those little, glistening eyes had a dangerous look in them. He had heard many conflicting stories concerning the natures and habits of the moose — some depicting it as a mild and timid creature and others as a very devil of ferocity — and as he had no first-hand knowledge to go by he decided to judge this big cow by appearances and act accordingly. So, feeling that appearances and circumstances now called for absolute inaction (until the moose showed her hand, so to speak), he lay perfectly still. It was quite evident that her glittering gaze did not detect him among the thick branches, and as there was not a breath of wind he hoped that she would not get his scent. His position was very uncomfortable; but he was afraid to

move a finger. His rifle was still in its woollen case, and he knew that if he tried to get it out she would be upon him before he could take aim and fire — unless her looks greatly belied her nature. Her great hoofs fascinated him. He had heard on good authority that a moose's favourite manner of fighting is with the fore-hoofs — and even now she was pawing the snow briskly with one of them. How long he might have lain there, holding his breath and suffering from cold and cramp, it is hard to say, if an unexpected diversion had not taken place.

A crashing and trampling of bushes and a swishing of branches sounded in front and to the left, and into the open, across it and into the woods beyond dashed a big bull-moose. His great head, with its weight of wide antlers, was thrown far back, and his small eyes fairly glowed with a comingling of terror and the fighting-light. Across his high shoulders, close to the base of the black neck, clung a panther. At this sight the cow snorted and cantered away, and Dick burst from the thicket and followed the trail of the bull at his best speed, snatching his rifle from its case as he ran. It was not the bull that he was after but the big panther, for he saw in it one of his

"ACROSS HIS HIGH SHOULDERS, CLOSE TO THE BASE OF THE BLACK NECK, CLUNG A PANTHER."

enemies — one of the two creatures that had given poor old Sober Sam such a bad time. Also, the hold that the panther had on the moose did not appeal to his ideas of clean sport. He found little difficulty in keeping to the right trail where it crossed and followed many others, for slender sprayings of blood stained the snow at frequent intervals. It was quite evident that the panther was holding on with both his fangs and his claws.

Dick pushed along at his best pace, and owing to the fact that the moose did not run in a straight line but circled often and dashed through every wall of close timber it could find, in the hope of scraping the panther off its back, he soon had it in sight. It was some time, however, and the the big bull was running more weakly, before he got a chance to shoot. It was not much of a chance, either, and he was so puffed that his hands were shaking. Halting, and dropping quickly on one knee, he brought the sights hastily and shakily in line against the body of the clinging panther and pressed the trigger. To his consternation the moose plunged forward on bent knees, staggered up, and again fell. The panther loosed its hold on the mangled neck and leapt lightly away. Dick sent two quick but futile shots

whipping into the underbrush after it. Then, seeing the splendid bull struggling in the snow, he advanced a few paces, took steady aim and put it out of its suffering. Here was a fine bull-moose to his bag; but he felt no satisfaction, for it was the panther he had set his heart upon. He knew that it would be a vain thing to try to follow the panther; so he set to work to do what he could, single-handed, with the carcass of the moose. It was a heavy job and not one that he liked — a regular butcher's task, in fact. As he had not brought an axe he had only his heavy sheath-knife to work with. He was toiling away like a beaver, but had very little to show for his exertion, when he suddenly realized that the sun was unpleasantly close to the black ridges of the western hills. Leaving the carcass to take its chances with the foragers of the night, he turned and started back along the trail he had come. It was not a straight trail, but it was safe. He had no mind to attempt a short-cut to the shack, in the failing light and unfamiliar country.

On arriving at the shack, Dick lost no time about telling of his adventure to Sober Sam. Sam was deeply impressed. "Dat painter quit his meat an' run when you fired?" he asked.

"You may bet your hat on that," replied Dick. "He not only ran but he kept on running. I sent two more shots after him to let him know I was still busy. But I wish I had plugged him instead of the moose."

"Dat right," said the old man, nodding his head. "Moose-meat mighty good, if not too tough; but heap better to kill dat darn painter! An' you didn't see nothin' of dat other critter — dat laughin' feller?"

"Not a sign," replied Dick. "Perhaps they were hunting together and when the panther got aboard the moose the other was left behind. Anyway I am glad I didn't meet him after the the light got bad."

"Guess we want dat moose-meat," said Sam, after a minute's reflection. "Need hide for moccasins, too. Guess we get supper quick an' go cut him up an' tote home as much as we can. Hitch de rest up in tree, so fox can't get 'im. Guess we do it, Dick, an' risk bad magic. You pretty brave feller, an' dat make me brave — an' I guess maybe dat laughin' b'ar long ways off."

"Right you are," replied Dick, with a quick and questioning glance at his companion. "I'm game for it, if you are; and I am very glad to see

that you are feeling better about this magic business. But what is it, Sam, that has steadied your nerve?"

"Guess dat magic ain't fust class, after all," replied Sam. "If it was, Dick, guess we'd not be settin' here now, so a'mighty comfor'ble."

They ate their supper quickly and then set out. Though there was no moon, the sky was clear and the frosty stars filled the open spaces of the wilderness with a thin, uncertain light. They advanced swiftly along the track which Dick had made earlier in the day. Each carried his rifle uncased in his hand, and they did not exchange a word until they reached the outer trails of the moose-yard. Here they halted for a moment and Sam asked if they were anywhere near the carcass.

"The centre of the yard is only a couple of hundred feet ahead," replied Dick, in a whisper, "and the dead bull is on the other side — not far, perhaps, but at the end of a confoundedly crooked trail."

"Guess we better go 'round," said Sam. "Don't want to scar de moose what's left."

They pressed forward slowly, breaking their way through new snow and twisted thickets, going as quietly as they could for fear of starting any

moose that might be resting in the middle of the yard. Sober Sam was in the lead, crawling on all-fours in the underbrush, and Dick was close upon the tails of his racquets, when something big and black suddenly heaved up in front of them, snorted, and then dashed away through the forest. Sam came to his feet with a gasp and stumbled back upon Dick.

"By t'under!" he exclaimed. And then, steadying himself and chuckling shortly, "Dat moose, I guess. T'ought 'im somethin' else for one minute."

They moved on and in about fifteen minutes came to the carcass of the big bull. A fox had helped himself to a few bites, but it was quite evident that the panther had not returned to it. Under Sober Sam's leadership the head and hide were soon off. They tied the head in the branches of a poplar, well out of the reach of any animal save a good climber. Then they cut the carcass into hunks and joints of convenient sizes and made two packs of as much of it as they could carry on their backs. They spent considerably more than an hour at this work. After a short rest they shouldered their loads and started for home.

Dick soon found that he had all he could do to keep the old trapper in sight, though the other carried the heavier pack. Sometimes, in the little natural clearings that dot the deeps of the forest like air-holes, he shortened the distance between them by breaking into a run. But Sam shuffled along at an unvarying pace, keeping a cautious lookout to the front and right and left, but never glancing back.

As they came to the edge of the tiny clearing in front of the shack Sam halted suddenly and stood motionless. He could not see the window, but on the snow lay a yellow square of lantern light. Dick saw it, too.

"Guess he t'ink we stay out all night," whispered Sam.

Next moment the light on the snow vanished, the door opened and a black, bulky figure appeared, running across the open. In a second it was gone, and the two trappers stood gaping, with their rifles in their hands.

"Why you don't shoot?" asked Sam.

"Why didn't you?" retorted Dick.

CHAPTER XI

THE THEFT OF THE PRECIOUS SKIN. SOBER SAM COMES TO GRIEF. THE KNIFE AND ITS OWNER

"It was the bear! The man who plays he's a bear! And he has fooled us again!" exclaimed Dick, in a voice of disgust.

"Why you don't shoot quick?" cried Sam, again.

"Don't talk like an ass," returned Dick. "You were in front, why didn't *you* shoot? Hang it all, Sam, we're both duffers."

"Guess so," said Sam. "Guess we ain't spry 'nough for dat b'ar."

They moved forward; and just as Sam was about to enter the open door, out of the blackness within sprang a long grey shape. It passed them quick as a flash; they heard an angry, spitting snarl, but before a rifle was raised the thing had vanished in the woods. Then they both began pumping nickel-coated bullets into the darkness, wildly, blindly and furiously. Each fired six shots, quick as magazine and trigger could be

worked; then they faced each other in mute disgust. Sober Sam was the first to break the painful silence that had followed the crackling of the rifles.

"We two darn fools," he cried. "We let 'em both go! Dick, you kick me an' me kick you."

"We both deserve it," returned Dick, mournfully, "but I don't think kicking each other will do any good. It won't hurt the panther and his partner, anyway — and those are the things we want to hurt. Suppose we step in and see what damage they have done."

They entered the shack and felt their way to the bench on which the lantern stood. The glass of the lantern was still warm. Sam raised it, struck a match and touched it to the wick. The yellow flame rose slowly, casting a dusky illumination around the interior of the shack. It displayed an untidy scene. Provisions were scattered about and the pelts lay here and there and everywhere on floor and bunks. The two trappers began to search anxiously to discover the amount of their loss.

"Bacum's gone! — de very last of it!" exclaimed Sam.

"We have plenty of meat. The country is

full of it," snapped Dick. "But count over the skins, we can't afford to lose our winter's work."

"Flour a'right," said Sam. "But one packet tea gone, I guess. Yes, dat right! Darn his hide!" He ran to his bunk and felt beneath the blankets. "Baccy a'right," he cried joyfully. "He didn't find my baccy anyhow."

"The devil take your baccy!" exclaimed Dick. "Look at the skins." Presently Dick asked in a low and shaking voice, "Do you see the black fox anywhere, Sam?"

"De black fox," repeated Sam, with a huskiness in his tone. "De black fox, Dick? Ain't he on the wall where I put 'im? No! Ain't he in de corner, wid dem other skins?"

"Can't find it," returned the other, trying to speak unconcernedly, "can't find it anywhere. All the others seem to be here — but I can't find that black fox."

They turned over all the pelts, great and small, dry, half-dry and green. They worked feverishly, in anxious silence. They pulled the blankets from the bunks and the spruce boughs from under the blankets. They searched among the provisions, and again went over all the furs. They counted the skins backward and forward, stacking them

separately according to their several kinds. They found everything — everything but that precious black skin that was worth more than all the others put together.

"It is gone! He has taken the black fox!" exclaimed Dick, bitterly. Sober Sam's emotions were such that his tongue could find no words for their expression. Uttering untranslatable grunts and snorts he dashed the unoffending peltries about the cabin. But that did no good. The skin of the black fox — the skin worth many dollars was gone!

At last the two barred the door and retired to their bunks, vowing that they would strike hard and fearlessly on the morrow to regain their stolen property, no matter how strong the magic of the robbers might be. The last words spoken by the old tribesman were, "If you hadn't been so darn slow, wid yer rifle, Dick, we still have dat fox."

Dick's reply was an angry snort. Then they both fell asleep. They awoke early, lit the fire and the lantern, and filled the tea kettle with water. Dick put the frying-pan to warm and cut several slices of moose meat. Sam took his axe from the corner and went out to cut some dry wood, for

the supply in the shack was low. The first faint lights of dawn were showing in the east, and in the west and middle sky the stars were still glinting. The air was bitterly cold — thirty degrees below zero perhaps — but there was no wind. Sober Sam pulled the door shut behind him with a bang (for the loss of the black fox was still rankling in his heart), slipped his feet into the thongs of his snow-shoes and entered the wood at a point where several dead spruce trees, felled a few days before, lay prone in the snow. He was feeling so vicious about the theft that he began to slash the branches from the prostrate spruces with an air of wreaking his vengeance upon them. He slashed viciously, carelessly, the bright sharp blade severing a great bough from the trunk at every blow. Having cleared away all the branches that were in convenient reach, he slipped his feet from his racquets and stepped up on to the trunk of a tree. Now he stopped and slashed downward, still with a full-arm swing for every stroke. Now he severed a branch on the right, and now on the left, and after every second blow he advanced a step along the prostrate trunk. He worked skilfully, though his mind was not on the task. He was still thinking angrily of the theft of the black fox skin; so

he did not handle the axe with the care that is usual with all experienced woodsmen. At last he shook himself clear, for a moment, of his sullen thoughts, and a glance showed him that he had knocked off enough of the smaller wood and must now apply his energy to the trunk of the tree. He was about to step down on to his waiting racquets and select another position from which to work, when the loss of the fox skin again came to his mind. He paused, standing on the great trunk, going over again and again a plan of unearthing the thief and recovering the valuable pelt. His eye selected a branch that might just as well be cut as not, standing out just below his feet; but his mind was otherwhere. He gave the axe a half-swing, holding it only with his right hand. It flashed downward, straight as falling-stone — but, when within a few inches of its mark, a spray of dry, unnoticed twigs turned the bright blade inward.

Sober Sam let a sharp yelp out of him — and the bright warm blood sprang out on the brown tree trunk and dripped into the white snow. The lower edge of the keen blade was imbedded in the wood, the upper edge in the outside of Sam's right foot, midway between the ankle and the

little toe. With a twist of the wrist — and an equally violent twist of the mouth, the old trapper freed the axe from its hold. For a second or two he stood and gazed down at the blood-stained moccasin. Then, "Darn everything," he muttered, "Darn me for one a'mighty fool!" Pulling off his blanket jacket he stooped and muffled the wounded foot in it. Then he limped along the trunk and sat down among the branches that still bristled about the top of it. "Dick! Dick!" he shouted, "turn out, I'm cut. Come quick and gimme a hand!" He kept up his shouting till Dick appeared on the scene.

Fifteen minutes later Sober Sam lay in his bunk, the cut foot bound tightly with bandages made recklessly of two of Dick's shirts. No large artery had been severed, so this dressing kept the flow of blood under control. But the old man was helpless, as far as moving was concerned. The cut was a deep one, and under such treatment as Dick was able to administer it was difficult to say how long it might take to heal. Both the trappers were depressed by the accident, for here was a blow to their plan of tracking down the thief of the fox skin. Dick could not even set out on the hunt alone, for it would be days, at least, before

Sam could put his foot to the ground or even let it swing unsupported. So they ate their breakfast in a heavy silence.

After breakfast had been eaten, and the tin mugs and plates washed, Dick got ready to go out. He heaped an armful of wood on the fire — the last of the supply in the shack.

"Now I'll go and finish your job," he said.

Sam's foot and leg were aching sharply, but he managed a twisted smile. "Don't finish in de way I done," he said, "we be in darn bad fix an' no mistake, if you get cut too."

Dick worked slowly and with caution for about an hour, and not once in that time did he allow his mind to wander from the blade of his axe. When a supply for several days was cut and stored, some of it in the shack and some beside the door, he laid his axe away and took up his rifle. That action did not escape Sober Sam's quick brown eyes.

"What you t'ink you do now, Dick?" he inquired anxiously.

"Oh, I am not going far," replied Dick. "I want to take a look round, that's all. I'll be back in an hour, Sam, so don't worry. You'll be right enough with your pipe and tobacco handy."

" You goin' on de b'ar's trail, I guess, an' leave me here all by my lonesome — an' may be not come back at all, if dat man-b'ar or dat painter gets you," said Sam mournfully. " Dat ain't right, Dick. Dat darn mean way for you to act."

" I tell you, I won't go more than half a mile from the shack," replied Dick. " I just want to have a look at that fellow's tracks, and at the panther's too. I'll be back soon."

" Well, you gimme my gun afore you go," said Sam. It was quite evident that he was again suffering from nerves.

Dick followed the tracks that led from the door of the shack, — and for about half a mile they were the tracks of the hind feet of a big bear. From there they became the imprints of the round, solid snow-shoes that had caught his attention earlier in the winter; so no doubt remained in his mind that the robber of their first trap and the man who pretended to be a bear were one and the same individual. The man in the primitive snow-shoes had, beyond a doubt, been the guilty party in the robbery of Sober Sam's dead-fall, and had since amused himself by wearing the skin, head, paws and all, and

striking terror into the heart of the old trapper. Beside the tracks of the round racquets ran the trail of the panther's pads; and the relationship of the man and the panther puzzled Dick. Could it be that the big cat was a pet of the man's and trained by him to hunt for the common pot and to take part in the game of intimidation? The tracks led up the left hand shore of the lake, and Dick had followed for more than a mile before he suddenly remembered his promise to Sober Sam to be back soon. He turned reluctantly.

Dick had not covered more than a hundred yards of the back trail when something in the snow just in front of him caught his eye. It was dark and narrow, and only two or three inches of it stood above the trampled white surface. He stooped and picked it up — and found it to be a long, straight knife, with a haft of heavy black wood that he did not know the name of. The blade was slender, and very sharp, and showed signs of having been ground many times. The name of the maker had been worn completely away. On the haft a design was cut which he could not make out at first; but, after cleaning it with snow, he saw that it was intended to represent a ship. The design was roughly cut. On

the other side of the haft he found the following inscription: — " J. Banks, bosun."

" A sailor," said Dick. " Now I wonder if this thief in the bear's skin is an old sea-faring man? What would bring — or drive — a sailor into this country and set him at these tricks? "

As he had no sheath for the knife and it was far too sharp to put in his pocket with safety, he continued on his homeward journey with it in his left hand. He was within a quarter of a mile of the shack when something — a sudden thrill of menace — caused him to glance quickly over his shoulder. And there, in the trail behind him and not more than a hundred yards away, he beheld a thing that, for a moment, filled him with unreasoning panic. It was the thief — the subject of Sober Sam's fears and his own indecision and many conjectures — a figure running wildly on uncouth round racquets, a great bear skin flapping about it, the man's head uncovered and the empty mask of the bear flapping on its shoulder. The man's head — its head — was thatched with a mass of long, tangled grey hair, and the face was over-grown to the very eyes with tangled whiskers. It waved its arms as it ran — and the arms and hands were encased in the

skin and paws of the bear. It ran fast and with no attempt at concealment. So wild and terrific did it look — leaping along, half man and half beast — that Dick sprang away, uttering a low cry. But the panic passed in a second and he halted and turned. The wild man in the flapping bear skin was close upon him now, crying, " My knife! My knife! " in a voice as harsh as the scream of a wild beast.

Dick managed to stand steady, though his legs twinged to be gone. In the eyes of the strange creature approaching him he saw the light of madness. He flung the knife toward it, then raised his rifle to his shoulder. It uttered a chuckling laugh at sight of the knife flashing and turning in the air; and the instant the weapon touched the snow it snatched it up.

CHAPTER XII

A LOST CHANCE. DICK WORKS HARD. THE TWO LYNX

The wild man — or whatever he was — recovered his lost knife and sprang into the underbrush. Dick shouted after him, feeling that now was the time to bring him to book in the matter of the stolen fox skin; but the time was already gone. He might as well have shouted to the wind to halt as to that mad and fleeing monster on the round snow-shoes. Should he have fired, he wondered. No, he could not have done that, for the fellow was a human and had faced the rifle unarmed.

Dick hesitated for a moment, then, without a thought for Sober Sam, and his promise of an early return, he forced a passage of the underbrush on the track of the owner of the knife. He was eager to get his hand on the fellow and come to an understanding concerning the skin of the black fox, no matter by what violent method. He was angry with himself, now, for having al-

lowed his nerves to flinch and cause him to throw the knife. He should have kept hold of the knife until its reckless owner was within his reach; then he should have let it fall at his feet and sprung upon the other as he stooped to pick it up. Oh, yes! now that it was too late he could see quite clearly exactly what he should have done.

Dick pressed along on the trail of the round snow-shoes as fast as the tangled forest permitted. In some places he was forced to plunge blindly through thickets of young, snow-weighted firs and spruces, with his left arm across his face to protect his eyes from the switching branches. In other places he found a clear path between the trunks of the tall timber. But, though he could not see his quarry, he felt that he was losing ground every minute; for the crashing of the other's flight through the bush grew fainter and fainter and at last died away entirely. After twenty minutes of this truly stern chase Dick halted, thoroughly winded.

" It's no go. I missed my chance," he muttered, after a few minutes spent in gasping and puffing. He turned in his tracks and started back along the way he had come at such a killing pace. Now he moved slowly; and suddenly he saw that

which caused him to keep a sharp lookout for the rest of his journey. Crossing the trail ran the track of the panther! This unwelcome discovery halted him; but the beast was nowhere in sight.

Dick found Sober Sam awaiting him in a state of fretful anxiety. "What kep' you so long?" asked the old man. "I t'ink maybe dat poacher get you, Dick, or de big painter jump on you — an' what happen to me den, I'd like to know."

Dick laughed. "Oh, I am fit as a fiddle," he said, "and ready to get dinner. But I must admit, Sam, that I quite forgot my promise to hurry home. I saw some things that fairly drove it out of my mind."

"What you see, Dick? You see dat t'ief, maybe? — an' try to catch 'im?" As Dick cooked the dinner he told Sam of the knife, of the design and the name on the haft of it, of the wild man's appearance and of the futile chase. Also, he told of the panther's tracks across the trail.

"Why you don't shoot dat t'ief when he come runnin' fore you?" asked the old trapper, in tones of disgust. "You ought to plug 'im dat minute chock-full of bullets — den we don't have no more trouble wid him at all."

"But he is a man — and he hadn't any sort

of weapon in his hand," expostulated Dick. "And he ran straight after me, without trying to hide, yelling for his knife."

"You ought to give him de knife — smack between de ribs. You ain't got much sense, Dick. You too darn a'mighty soft. He took our fox skin, worth hundreds an' hundreds of dollars, an' plenty good grub, an' he scare us both bad as he can to make us quit dis country — so you had ought to kill 'im, Dick. You won't get good chance like dat, any more maybe."

"If I'd killed the poor mad devil — yes, I think he's all wrong in his brain — perhaps we should never be able to find the fox skin," replied Dick. "No doubt he has it hidden in some tight little place where we'd not find it if we searched a year. The panther could not tell us where it was hidden, even if he wanted to. Anyway, I didn't shoot him or knife him, — and I'm mighty glad I didn't. If he had been trying to get a shot at me, or hiding in the bushes to jump out at me, I'd have let him have a bullet and welcome. But he wasn't hiding and he wasn't armed. I believe that knife is the only weapon he possesses — and that is what he was after. He dropped it last night I suppose. But I should have got hold of

him and knocked him about a bit until he told me something about that fox skin and promised to leave our shack and our traps alone in future. Yes, that is what I should have done."

"Oh, yes!" retorted Sam, with a thin smile. "Dat's what you had ought to done, Dick, you bet. He let you knock 'im about, I guess, a'right, an' tell you what you ax 'im. But maybe not. Maybe he knock you instead. I dunno."

"Would you have shot the poor, crazy, unarmed devil?" asked Dick, flushing under the old red-man's dry jeers.

"You bet," returned the other, promptly — "'less I happen to be too scart to get my gun up — like you was maybe. Yes, you bet I shoot dat mean t'ief. Ain't he stole our grub an' our pelts an' our fine black fox skin? Ain't he scart me most outer my life? — and ain't he set his big painter after us?"

"But I've read that it is one of the customs of your race, Sam, to protect crazy people and to put up with all manner of inconvenience from them without punishing them," said Dick.

"Dat a'right," replied Sam. "You read heap fine t'ings in books I guess. But how I know dat fellow crazy? Who tell me — what? He just

play crazy, I guess, so we won't hurt 'im. Well, I shoot him, anyhow — an' ax him after dat if he crazy or not."

During the week following Sam's accident and Dick's adventure with the mysterious man in the bear's skin, nothing more was seen or heard of either the thief or his big, green-eyed partner. Sam's cut foot pained him sharply for many hours at a time, in spite of the complete rest which he took and of Dick's unfailing attentions. No doubt the bone was bruised. As for poor Dick, he had to do what he could toward attending to the traps as well as looking after his companion, the cooking and the fire-wood. Every day he worked from before dawn until many hours after dark; for, though he gradually reduced the number of his traps in commission by hanging them in the trees, his luck in taking fox, lynx and mink seemed to improve steadily. After a hard day in the open, capped with a hearty supper of moose-meat, boiled rice and tea, he would work with the skins until he fell asleep at the task. But this grind did not hurt him. His muscles grew and hardened, his chest expanded and his skill with snow-shoes, axe and knife increased amazingly.

Sunday came and it was indeed a day of rest for

Dick, for he had nothing to do but carry in a little wood and water, cook and attend to his companion. The two spent most of the day in talking — and most of the talk concerned the unknown thief and his partner the big panther. By this time, all fear of magic in connection with these two had left Sober Sam's mind. The case was decidedly unusual, he admitted, but did not smack of big medicine. A wild man of the wood strangely disguised in a stolen bear skin and wearing round, hide-filled racquets, and a trained panther — and there it was in a nutshell.

"Soon as I get round agin, we'll cook their dough for 'em," said Sam. But Dick had another thought in his mind — of which he said nothing. He saw no reason (or, at least, nothing but a coward's reason) for delaying the hunt for the thief until the healing of the old man's foot. The precious fox skin might be ruined by the time it was recovered, if they waited so long. Or the wild man might leave the country, taking the secret of his hiding-place and the priceless pelt along with him. He felt sure that the man was crazy; and the actions of a crazy man are not to be depended upon, even in the northern wilderness. And Dick believed himself to be quite equal

to the task of dealing with that fur-clad idiot single-handed. The unknown one possessed no firearms. Of that he felt certain. And he was not afraid of the panther, either. In the case of that sly beast, he would keep his eyes about him and shoot at sight. In the case of the man, of course, he would not shoot unless he absolutely had to for the sake of his own life. It was Sober Sam's belief that the thief had his headquarters somewhere on or near Wigwam Mountain, which tops the height of land between Two-Fox Pond and Smoky Pot with its round, rocky, shaggy cone. Dick was of the same opinion.

Dick had the western line of traps to see to on Monday, so he decided to leave the expedition to Wigwam Mountain until Tuesday. He was astir early on Monday morning, lit the fire, got water from the hole in the lake (which always froze over to a thickness of two or three inches during the night, and had to be broken with an axe every morning), and cooked breakfast. By this time — thanks to the thief — all their bacon and salt pork were gone. Their flour and rice had dwindled to something very near the vanishing point; but tea still held and fresh meat was to be had at any time. As soon as breakfast was over

Dick put a few slices of cold meat and a couple of cakes of " hard-tack " in his pocket, blew out the lantern, took his rifle from its corner and opened the door.

" Mind de painter," said Sam. " If you get a shot at either of 'em, let 'em have it. But don't go lookin' for 'em."

" Right you are," replied Dick. " I'm not looking for trouble to-day."

He set out gaily, striking westward, forgetting that a man often finds what he is not looking for.

At noon Dick halted and ate the cold fare from his pocket. In the traps already examined he had found one red fox and nothing more; but, as he had travelled slowly and spent much time in re-setting and altering the positions of the traps the line was not exhausted. He did not build a fire, but quenched his thirst with cold tea from a flask. The air was quite mild, considering the place and season of the year — that is, one could remove a mitten and leave the hand bare for several minutes without serious discomfort. The sky was grey instead of pale blue, and the small, colourless sun flooded the wilderness with a subdued radiance. The only sound that reached Dick's ears from all those surrounding miles and

miles of forest, barren, hill and valley was the sharp rattle of the hammering of a woodpecker on the stem of an ancient hemlock. There was no sign of animal life within range of his vision, though the spotless drifts and levels of the snow were marked here and there with the fine traceries of wood-mouse trails and the big, three-dotted tracks of the white hares. And there ran the trail of a hunting-fox, laid the night before — and there the broad padded signature of a lynx. Dick loved and knew that wild, snow-shrouded country by now, and the vast distances and silences of it no longer weighed upon his spirits as at first. He rested for a few minutes after having finished his simple meal, and then got to his feet and went onward about his business. He glanced up at the sky as he crossed the little clearing in which he had lunched. "There'll be snow before night," he said.

Dick moved quietly, in thick covers letting the branches between which he passed away noiselessly back into place. He had no especial reason for doing so, but by now it had become as second-nature to him to make no more sound, when in the woods, than was absolutely necessary. Down in a narrow valley, beside a small snow-buried

brook, he found a fine specimen of mink in a home-made trap of Sam's setting. He cleared this from the spiked jaw that held it, thrust it head-downward into one of the deep pockets of his blanket coat, unanchored the trap and reset it about fifty yards further up the stream. Then, making no more noise than a cat might have, he made his way up the steep bank on all fours. His head was just above the edge when he caught sight of something that halted him and held him motionless as wood. In front of him, and not more than twenty feet away, something was going on in the deep, soft snow that Dick could not make out for several seconds. In a soundless commotion and a fine spray of the frosty powder, two tawny, yellow-grey bodies were rolling over and over, gripped close. Then Dick saw that these were two lynx in deadly combat. They were fighting with fangs and claws, and at one moment one was on top and at the next moment the other. They held with fore-claws and teeth and did the punishing work with their great hind legs, which were as strong as steel springs and shod with claws like short, keen knife-blades. The best position was the under one, for it gave plenty of chance to rip the belly of the enemy. It is not to be won-

dered at that the positions were continually changing. Patches of fur began to fly. Then Dick raised his rifle, for he did not like to see good pelts ruined. Two quick shots rang out — and the fight was ended in a way which neither of the combatants had expected.

CHAPTER XIII

LOST. NIGHT IN THE SNOW-STORM. A GLIMPSE OF A SHADOWY BUT FAMILIAR FORM. A TIMELY BREAKFAST

Dick had fired to kill; and both lynx lay motionless when he reached them. The furs were not damaged, save in a few spots on the under sides, so Dick stood his rifle against a tree and set to work with his knife. He was in the shelter of a wide spreading spruce, and it was not until both pelts were off and the two red, sinewy carcasses lay naked on the snow that he noticed that the grey sky had begun to shake down its white flakes. Still the air was quiet. The innumerable feathery flakes drifted down from the low grey sky, weaving pale curtains on every hand that hemmed in the vision as surely as mist or darkness. A soft, rustling whisper almost as faint as silence itself filled the air. Dick uttered an exclamation of concern at the sight and quickly made a pack of the two skins and snatched up his rifle. The snow must have been falling for ten

or fifteen minutes before he noticed it (so intent had he been on the work of skinning the lynx), for when he stepped out from the shelter of the big spruce he found the tracks of his racquets already almost obliterated. He fumbled through his outer pockets for his compass — then, with trembling hands, through the pockets of the woollen " cardigan " that he wore under his blanket coat. He could not find the little brass compass anywhere. He had left it in the shack.

" It doesn't matter," he said, " I think I can find my way home without much trouble." But he looked far from confident as he stepped out on the faint trail. The snow continued to fall and the gloom to gather closer over the wilderness, and the young trapper had not retraced more than a hundred paces of the way before his old trail was entirely hidden. But he *felt* that he knew the direction to take and, trusting to that feeling, pressed onward. The crowding, unswerving flakes fell so thickly that he could not see further than a yard or two in front of him. After a half-hour of heavy tramping he came to the valley of a stream that was unfamiliar to him. He examined it carefully, groping about and seeking for some guiding landmark, and was forced to admit that

he had gone astray from the right course. This stream, however, might be one of several streams that he knew; but even so, what did that possibility profit him? One fair-sized brook ran into Two-Fox Pond; but he had not the faintest idea where the others that threaded the country ran to. A chill of apprehension — a twinge of fear of that vast, trackless, blinded wilderness — went over him like a sudden cold wind.

"Buck up," he exclaimed. "This is nothing to fret about, I'll be right enough when the snow holds up."

He decided to keep to the stream, thinking that if he followed it down the chances of arriving at some familiar spot would be better than if he simply trailed blindly through the woods. He spent a good deal of time in deciding on the slope of the land — the direction in which the ice-bound, snow-buried waters were running. Still the snow fell thickly and the faint light gradually lessened. Dick tramped along the winding bed of the stream, pausing now and again to clear the clinging snow from his head and shoulders and brush it away from his face. In some places great trees overhung him, entirely blanketing what little light remained. In some places the slope of the

valley was short and sharp, and he knew that he was passing over the fettered sinews of snarling water-falls. At last he came out on a level place, and the suggestion of width was all about him. Beyond a doubt it was a lake or pond; but of its size he could ascertain nothing, for by now his vision carried no more than a yard or two.

"It may be Two-Fox Pond," he muttered — "and again it may not. This country is full of ponds. I've done enough for to-day, however, so I'll just get back into the bush and make camp for the night. If the snow holds up by morning I shall be right as wheat. But I wish I'd put a trifle more grub in my pockets before leaving the shack."

Dick turned in his tracks, groped his way back to the mouth of the river, and climbed up the low bank into the timber. In the heart of a thicket he dug a trench in the soft snow, roofed one end of it with branches torn from the surrounding bush, and by good luck found several dead and tinder-dry shrubs close at hand. He started a fire with this dry stuff in one end of the trench, and by the red light he tore, and cut with his knife, a supply of heavier wood. After this "spell" of hard work he felt hungrier than ever,

and felt anxiously through all his pockets; but not so much as a crumb of food could he find. So, resigned to the discomfort of an empty stomach until the morrow, when daylight might enable him to shoot a hare or a ruffed grouse, he crawled under his poor shelter. In the yellow light of the fire the descending snow looked as white and almost as substantial as a water-fall. Its multitudinous flakes hissed and vanished in the orange flames.

Dick lay in his retreat, on a thin bed of spruce boughs, with his feet toward the fire and his rifle at his side. He was tired and his eyelids were heavy. Save for the vacant sensation under his belt he felt comfortable enough and on fairly good terms with life. The fact that he was lost did not cause him much anxiety, for he felt sure that, when the snow ceased, he should be able to identify the position of the lake in front of him and, with the sun for a guide, make his way to Two-Fox Pond without much trouble. But he worried a little about Sober Sam, and hoped the old man would be able to feed himself during his absence.

Dick was about to surrender himself to slumber when he espied two yellow-green, steady points

of light beyond the fire, glowing from blackness above the far end of the trench. He had seen the same baleful signals before, across a former campfire, and he suspected that these belonged to the same bold haunter of the night. He raised his rifle cautiously, brought the sights in line as well as he could in that uncertain light and without shifting his position, and pressed the trigger; with the crack of the report sounded a quick, snarling yelp — and the glowing eyes vanished. He crawled from the shelter, and passed beyond the fire. The snow was torn at the edge of the trench; and here were imprints of the big, familiar pads; and here was a small dark stain — yes, a drop or two of blood — fast vanishing under the million fingers of the storm. Dick turned to his couch, placed more fuel on the fire, and managed to keep his eyes open for another hour. Then suddenly, without warning, he drifted into the land of dreams.

The dull ache of cold awakened Dick just at the break of dawn. He sat up stiffly, to find the fire reduced to nothing but a few red coals in a winding sheet of grey ashes and feathery flakes, and the trench half full of snow. The air was bitterly cold, but still and clear. The storm had

ceased as noiselessly and windlessly as it had begun. Day was lifting a glass-grey lid behind the eastern forests, and in the west the last stars were glinting faintly. Dick's first concern was for the fire, so he speedily hustled some dry wood and re-kindled it. As soon as it was crackling cheerily he allowed his mind to dwell on the subject of breakfast. Oh for a plump grouse! — or even a sinewy hare! But both hare and grouse must be caught before eaten — and seen before caught. With a sigh Dick left the warmth of the trench and, with his racquets on his feet, and his rifle in his hand, scrambled up to the powdery levels of the snow. First of all, he descended into the white valley of the river and so out to the edge of the broad white shield of the lake. By a certain clump of pines on the far side of it, and a level ridge of hills beyond, as well as by the curves of the shores, he recognized the lake as one lying about six miles to the westward of his furthest line of traps. He had visited it once with Sober Sam. He felt relieved to know that an eastward course would bring him, after a few hours of travelling, into familiar country. But still the problem of food remained unsolved. Not a sign of life was to be seen on the wide surface of the

lake or about the surrounding shores — or, for that matter, in the gradually brightening sky overhead. He returned to the wooded bank and broke his way through the underbrush. He moved with as little sound and disturbance of branches as possible, and had not gone far before he found fresh fox tracks cut deep in the snow. He followed this trail, suspecting the fox, too, of looking for breakfast. Carefully as he moved, however, he failed to catch sight of the fox; but he suddenly heard word of that sly beast's hunting. A rush and whir of wings in front told him that a grouse had been flushed from its warm retreat under the new-fallen snow. He hurried forward, knowing enough of the habits of the northern ruffed grouse to feel pretty certain of finding the bird seated, spellbound by the sense of danger, in some tree close at hand. He saw marks in the snow showing where the fox had pounced and missed and from where the grouse had risen; but both hunter and hunted had vanished. As he moved to the left, scanning the trees, two more birds puffed out of the snow close in front of his racquets and whirred into the nearest tree. There they sat with their necks stretched out and up, motionless as if carved from wood; and as he raised his rifle, he caught

sight of the bird which the fox had flushed perched in the same tree.

Dick was a good shot, and he stood not more than fifteen yards from the spruce in which the birds had taken refuge. He took careful aim at the head of the lowest bird, and fired. That grouse fell to the snow and the others continued to sit motionless. Now he fired at the head of the next higher, with the same result. His third shot carried away the head of the third and highest bird. Had he killed the top bird first, the crashing of its body among the branches above the others would have set them on the wing — and the bird that is frightened out of a tree usually flies a long way before pitching or alighting, and if it pitches on the ground it usually runs. Dick picked up the three birds and saw that he had taken the head clean off each. They were plump, for the wilderness was full, that winter, of seeds of all kinds. He examined the "snow-shoes" of the dead birds, for familiarity could not dull his interest in such things. The toes of grouse were outlined on both sides, with short yellow fringes that were not unlike the flat needles of the fir and spruce in shape. These made a snow-shoe, or racquet, of each foot, enabling the

birds to run upon the surface of soft snow. These yellow fringes, or whatever you choose to call them, grow upon the toes of the ruffed grouse every autumn, in time for the first snow, and drop off in the spring.

Dick thrust the plump birds into his pockets and returned to the fire. There he drew and skinned one of them (skinning birds is quicker than plucking them, and is the woods way), and soon had it broiling over a bed of coals. He made a good breakfast, took his bearings and struck out for Two-Fox Pond, with two grouse in his pockets and the lynx skins on his back. The sun came up in front, bright as fire and colourless as glass, flooding the pale dome of the sky with cold radiance and flashing a million glittering rays and stars of light from the world's winding-sheet. And with the rising of the sun a small, keen wind sprang up, that darted here and there and cut the dry snow like strokes from an unseen whip-lash. Dick found the cold intense, and when it crossed his path in the open places of the forest it seemed to snatch the very breath from his nostrils. So he travelled as fast as the depth and lightness of the snow allowed, changed his rifle frequently from one hand to the other and continually beat

the free arm across his breast. He kept to the heavy timber where he could, for in the shelter of the big trees the cold seemed less intense, and his eyes escaped the white glare of unshadowed sunlight on unshadowed snow. So heavy was the going that an hour had passed from the time of his leaving the fire before he reached the edge of that barren across which he and Sam had watched the timber-wolves on the trail of the stag. He was tired and thirsty, and crouching in the shelter of a dense thicket he rested for a little while and tried to quench his thirst with snow. But the snow did not give any real and lasting satisfaction, and made his tongue and throat feel raw and sore. Spurred on by thoughts of the warm shack and a steaming tea-kettle, he got to his feet and pressed forward. His eyes began to ache from the glare of the new snow, and so eager was he to reach home that he passed the spots where several of his traps were set without taking the trouble to turn aside and examine them. He was in familiar country now, and struck for the shack by the shortest route.

CHAPTER XIV

DICK SETS OUT TO CATCH THE THIEF. HE FINDS THE TRAIL OF THE ROUND SNOW-SHOES. THE TRAILER TRAILED. THE ATTACK AND THE RESCUE

Dick found Sober Sam in a bad temper and a terrible state of nerves; also, the poor old fellow's foot was paining him severely, for he had been hopping about the shack getting food for himself. But it was anxiety for Dick, more than anything else, that had upset him.

"I t'ink you gone for good!" he cried, by way of greeting. "T'ink dat painter get you, Dick. What keep you, anyhow — an' leave me all alone with dis a'mighty bad foot?"

"I am sorry," replied Dick, good-naturedly. "I lost myself in the storm, and made camp in the snow. Hadn't much luck with the traps, either. Got a fox — and here are the pelts of two lynx I shot — and here is a brace of partridges for dinner."

Sober Sam's face cleared. "Dat not too bad,"

he admitted. "See any sign of dat poacher or dat darn painter?"

"Yes, I saw the painter. He came sneaking round my fire, and I took a shot at him. I drew blood, too."

"You nick 'im an' not kill 'im? Dat all-fired big pity, Dick. He hunt you now all de time, I guess. He try like 'ell now, to get square wid you. Yes, dat right, Dick. You needn't laugh."

"Let him hunt me as much as he wants to," replied Dick, courageously. He was drinking tea now, and felt equal to any adventure. "The more he hunts me, and the nearer he comes to me, the better I'll like it. Next time I take a shot at him I'll do more than bring a drop of blood. I want that panther skin — for a trophy, not for trade."

"Dat a'right. Darn good talk, dat! I'm go hunt 'em both, an' get our black fox skin back, soon as my foot get well," returned Sam.

Dick rested most of the afternoon, doing no work beyond cleaning and stretching the new skins. All his muscles ached, for he had caught cold in the trench, without blankets and with an insufficient fire. He retired early to his bunk, and awoke in the morning, feeling stiff and sore

all over. It was not until two days later that he felt himself to be in fit condition to go out on trail of the thief. He left the shack at an early hour, after having eaten a hearty breakfast, leaving the impression in Sam's mind that he was going to make the round of one of the lines of traps. He carried his compass this time, his rifle and a belt-axe, a small tin kettle, and a good store of hard-tack and cold meat in his pockets. The dawn gave promise of a fine day, but the still air was fairly tingling with frost. But the stiffness had left Dick's joints by this time, and with his fur cap pulled low across his forehead and about his ears, great fur-lined mittens on his hands, and body and limbs clothed in many thicknesses of wool, he defied the cold. He went to the lake, where the surface was level and unobstructed and the snow beaten to a comparative firmness by the wind of the previous day, and shaped his course toward the great, lifeless swamp at its upper end and the gloomy cone of Wigwam Mountain beyond. He kept close to the timber of the western shore.

Dick reached the upper end of the Two-Fox Pond after an uneventful half-hour, and at the very edge of the swamp he found what he was looking for — the trail of the round snow-shoes.

At the sight, his heart began to hammer with unusual speed and force — for this is an adventure of considerable magnitude that he has undertaken. He halted and gazed cautiously on all sides. He examined the tracks and found that the maker of them had simply issued from the swamp upon the edge of the lake, faced about and reentered the thickets. So he followed the return trail. It led him through the swamp by a twisting, aimless-seeming course, over all manner of drifted tangles and fallen trees and through switching thickets. He looked frequently to right and left, but found no accompanying panther tracks. Following the marks of the round racquets, he soon came to the higher land and bigger timber which Sober Sam had once described to him. Here the trail could be followed with much less effort than in the swamp. It led, by many curves and twists, in places almost doubling on itself, toward Wigwam Mountain.

"That's where he'll be found," said Dick.

From this point Dick became so intent upon the trail and the direction in which its windings were leading him, that he forgot to keep a sharp lookout to the left and right and on the trees overhead.

When Dick stood on the margin of the lake, at the edge of the swamp, examining the tracks of the snow-shoes, he was being watched from the depth of the nearest thicket by a pair of pale, round eyes — the eyes of the big panther, and as he forced his way through the swamp, along the twisting trail, the panther moved beside him, not more than thirty feet away, slinking with its lean belly close to the snow and his round head upraised. Sometimes it crouched, remaining motionless until he had passed ten or twenty, ahead; and when it quickened its pace to keep up with him it limped slightly. The bullet from his rifle, fired at the flaming eyes beyond the camp-fire, had nicked its left fore-paw. When Dick reached the high timber, where the trees and underbrush stood farther apart than in the fastnesses of the swamp, the panther moved deeper into the woods, but continued to keep the young man in sight. At last the panther made a wide circle, past Dick, and drew near the trail of the round snow-shoes ahead of him. It lay quiet for a few seconds listening, then it sprang to the trunk of a great pine, clawed its way swiftly up and into the branches. One branch, lower and longer than the other, reached out over the trail. The

"DICK, HEEDLESS OF THE DANGER THAT MENACED HIM, TRAMPED FORWARD ALONG THE TRAIL."

panther slipped out on this and lay crouched close, motionless as a part of the tree save for an occasional quick, eager twitching of its mighty muscles and a savage trembling of its long tail. The hunting-lust, the blood-lust, burned in its pale eyes. Its hind legs were drawn well under its sinewy body and its broad fore-paws clung to the branch, the sharp claws unsheathed and cutting the bark. And so it waited.

Dick, heedless of the danger that menaced him, tramped forward along the trail of the mysterious thief, eager to run him to earth and confront him. Here the white forest floor began to slope upward to meet the steep and rugged base of the mountain.

"I may be coming up on him any time now," murmured Dick, glancing keenly to right and left. He saw no sign of the object of his search among the straight tree-trunks. He moved forward a few paces more, halted, and began to unfasten the blanket case of his rifle.

On the overhanging branch of the great pine the panther cleared his claws noiselessly from the rough bark, flattened his short ears and looked down over one great forearm with red lust in his

round eyes. His tail slashed from side to side, his muscles twitched — and then he dropped. He struck Dick's shoulders and man and beast went down. Dick screamed, then struggled blindly. The claws of the panther ripped his stout clothing — marked the skin of his shoulders and back — struck again and cut the flesh in short deep furrows. Twice the eager jaws snapped down at his neck; and twice they were met by the muzzle of the rifle and thrust back, unsatisfied. Now one of the merciless hind feet tore him. Uttering a yell, he twisted on to his left side and began to fight furiously with his right arm and the encased rifle. He landed a half-arm blow across the panther's head that dazed it for a second — but only for a second. The fierce beast did not lose its hold for even a fraction of a second. Dick twisted and kicked and struck blindly, trying to get hold of his belt-axe with his left hand; but he was already weakening with loss of blood and the pain of his wounds. His chances of surviving that fight were of the slightest when, with a wordless yell that set the woods ringing, a figure partially wrapped in a flapping bear skin threw itself upon the panther. For a mad minute the three rolled together in the snow, kicking, claw-

ing, snarling, and shouting. Then a spinning blackness closed over Dick's vision.

When Dick next opened his eyes he found himself lying on a bed of spruce branches and skins in a low-roofed, gloomy place that was half cabin, half cave. Such light as there was entered by way of an irregular opening on a level with the clay, brush-strewn floor. A small fire of peat-like substance burned smokily on a flat stone on one side of the apartment, and the little reek of it filled the air under the low roof. Shaken by sensations of alarm and amazement, Dick tried to raise himself to an upright position; but sudden, sharp pains shot through his back, shoulders and legs, his head seemed to spin, and he sank back again. For several minutes he lay still, with his eyes closed and his heart fluttering. Again opening his eyes he studied the strange retreat to which he had been brought so mysteriously. Save for his own presence, the den was empty. A few skins, imperfectly cured, and a number of white bones lay about the floor — and at sight of those bones, by some swift association of ideas, Dick's mind cleared and a vision of the big panther returned to it. Now he remembered it all — every incident of the journey, the sudden clutching

weight of the panther on his back, the furious hopeless fight and the providential rescue of the wild man himself. But how he had come to this primitive retreat he had not the faintest notion. Could it be that the mad thief had not only saved him from death at the claws and teeth of the panther, but had also carried him, unconscious, to this den and this rough couch, and dressed his wounds? So it seemed, at any rate, for by feeling up and around with his left hand he found that his back and shoulders were bandaged in strips of ancient blanket.

"But why should he have saved me?" reflected Dick. "The panther is his partner, if I know anything at all about it, and I am a stranger. After scaring me, hunting me, and robbing me, what could have got into his head to take the trouble to save my life and knock the panther about? And it must have taken considerable doing, too, from what I know of that panther."

His head and eyes ached, and his mouth felt dry and hot. Again his mind began to cloud, and all manner of absurd ideas came to him. Now he thought he was still struggling with the panther in the snow; and now the rescuer came, but in the person of Sober Sam instead of the wild man;

and now he was lying in his own familiar bunk in the shack on Two-Fox Pond. His eyelids slipped down and he drifted into deep but uneasy slumber.

When Dick awoke it was to behold his wild rescuer and host kneeling beside his couch. The sight was a truly daunting one, more especially to a man weak with wounds and just awakened from an unrefreshing sleep. The young man started violently and uttered a low cry. The strange creature beside him grinned a broad, wild but reassuring grin. His wild, pale grey eyes were fixed upon Dick's face; and, after the first start of dismay, Dick returned the gaze steadily.

"That's one ye owe me, lad," said the wild man, in a husky, unused sort of voice. "One ye owe me," he repeated. "Aye, one ye owe me." He nodded his head after each word.

Dick's fear turned to astonishment. So this wild creature that hunted with panther, dressed in uncured furs, robbed traps and provisions, travelled on snow-shoes of solid hide or bark and lived in a cave could talk! This seemed an astonishing thing to Dick.

"Yes," said Dick, "I owe my life to you." He was so busy examining the other's appearance

that he could think of nothing else to say just then. His host no longer wore the great bear skin, but his inner garments were not much more elaborate. They consisted of an ill-shaped jacket, or shirt, of badly sewn and dressed fox skins, fur-side out, laced with strips of raw-hide from waist to chin. This garment looked as if it had never been taken off since it was first laboriously put on. His legs were encased in rough trousers made of mixed fox and lynx skins, the bottoms of which were thrust into the tops of shapeless, high-legged moccasins. The wild man's face was a flowing tangle of grey whiskers, and his head was thatched with a superabundance of grey hair.

"I am thirsty," said Dick.

The other looked puzzled for a moment, and shook his head. Then, "Thirsty?" he repeated. "Thirsty? Don't know."

"Dry," said Dick.

The short word had an almost magical effect on the wild man. He arose from his squatting position beside the bed of branches and skins and stepped over to the fire on the flat stone. There hung a rusty kettle, and from it he poured something hot into a roughly carved cup of wood. This he brought to Dick, and it proved to be tea

of an exceedingly strong brew. Dick began to sip it slowly. The other watched him for a few moments, with a puzzled, baffled expression in his eyes. Suddenly he shot out his right arm and poked Dick in the middle with a claw like finger. "Belly?" he inquired hopefully. "Belly?" he repeated, more anxiously.

Now it was Dick's turn to be puzzled — and he looked it.

"Belly? — empty?" said the wild man. Light dawned upon Dick. "Yes, I am hungry," he said. "Hungry and sore and weak. Have you anything for me to eat?"

In reply, the wild man turned and crawled out of the cave; but he was back in a minute with a lump of raw, frozen meat in his hand. This he presented to Dick with a fine air of hospitality. Dick shook his head. "Cook?" he said, and pointed to the fire.

"Yes — cook," said the other. "Cook. That's right, lad. Aye, that's right." He hunted about the floor of the den until he found a long, sharp bone. One end of this he thrust into the lump of meat and, squatting close to the fire, he held the ragged, frost-bitten flesh to the flame.

CHAPTER XV

A QUEER NURSE AND A QUEERER COMPANION. FRAGMENTS OF THE WILD MAN'S PAST

THE scent of the scorching meat took away Dick's appetite; and by the time his host presented it to him, charred on the surfaces and scarcely warm inside, he could only shake his aching head and turn away.

"I don't feel hungry now," he said, "but I am still thirsty and my head aches horribly."

"Fever," said the wild man. He felt Dick's hand and face with a big, gnarled hand the nails of which were as long as the panther's claws. "Aye, lad, ye've got it — an' that comes of layin' off this here gold-coast all these months."

"What?" exclaimed Dick, feebly. "What do you mean by the gold-coast? What are you talking about?"

"Don't know," replied the other, and tearing the scorched meat into several lumpy fragments with his fingers, he bolted them swiftly, one by

one. "Good," he murmured, and wiped the back of his hand across his bewhiskered lips. Dick groaned, for weakness of fever brought on by loss of blood and fatigue was upon him. The light of interest returned to the wild man's eyes at that sound.

"Aye, lad, ye be took, for sure," he said, "ye can take Joe Banks' word for that there. But I'll give 'e a swig o' yarb tea, seein's how doctor be dead himself, all along o' this here same fever."

Dick was beyond questioning this strange speech; and a minute later, when the wooden cup was held to his lips, he swallowed a half-pint of cold, bitter-sweet liquid without a word or motion of objection. He found it to be both refreshing and comforting; and, a minute later, he fell asleep.

Dick slept for several hours. The wild man, who had mentioned his name as Joe Banks, remained by his couch for a few minutes, gazing into his face with a puzzled expression; then muttering a jumble of meaningless words, he clawed some spruce boughs and peltries together near the fire, lay down and resigned himself to sound slumber. Like the other silent-footed haunters of the wilderness, day was his time of

rest and night his season of activity. Joe Banks had not been asleep for more than ten minutes when the low entrance to the den was darkened by the form of the big panther. The creature entered silently, with a cautious halting motion of its sinewy limbs and lean body, paused for a second just within the mouth of the den and glared around with its pale, luminous eyes. Its gaze shifted from the form of its wild companion curled up beside the fire, to the form on the rough couch beyond. It advanced, limping slightly, silent as a tawny shadow, and again halted close to where Dick lay heedless and unprotected. Standing motionless, but with relaxed muscles, it stared at him fixedly for a full minute. At last it lowered its head and sniffed his left hand, which lay uncovered. Then it turned away, unearthed a bedraggled looking bone from a dark corner, carried this treasure close to the fire and lay down and began to gnaw it. The sound of the gnawing awaked the wild man. He sat up, glanced at the big cat, and then lay down again.

When Dick awoke the den was dark save for the fitful light of the fire, which had been replenished only a few minutes before with dry peat and a few sticks of birch. Joe Banks was

gone, but by the yellow flames Dick saw the big panther lying outstretched with its round head on its paws. Remembering his last interview with the panther — he could not doubt for a moment that this was the same beast — he felt decidedly uncomfortable. Here he was, wounded and defenceless, with a cunning and ferocious mountain panther lying not three yards away. With his left hand he felt about his waist and hips for his belt-axe; but axe and belt were gone. He searched about the branches and skins of his bed with groping fingers, hoping to discover his axe or rifle, or something that might serve as a weapon in case of need. But nothing lay near at hand heavier than the wooden cup from which he had swallowed the herb tea before his last sleep. It stood beside the head of his couch, and as he lifted it with his left hand, possessed of a vague idea that it would serve as a weapon against the panther, cool liquid splashed over his finger. So he brought the bowl to his lips, sniffed inquiringly and found it to be of the same brew as the previous dose, and drained it to the last drop. There were flavours of spruce, winter-green and many more forest properties about it, bitter and sweet on the tongue, and wonderfully

cool further down. So he drank with relish, for the moment forgetting the panther. In trying to return the cup to its place on the floor beside his bed, it slipped from his fingers and fell with a clatter. At that, the panther raised its round head, and its round eyes met Dick's horrified gaze. So, for what seemed a long time to one of them at least, the man and the beast stared at each other without so much as the flicker of an eyelid. Then, suddenly, the big cat lowered his head to his paws again. A sigh of wonder and relief escaped Dick.

For a long time both occupants of the den lay motionless and silent. Dick, who felt better for his sleep, was greatly puzzled by the panther's evident indifference to his presence. Also, he wondered at the wild man's absence, and hoped for his speedy return; for, though the big cat seemed peacefully inclined just now, he felt the smart and ache of his wounds and did not trust it. Lying there, with the smell of smoke, badly cured skins, mouldy bones and damp rock in his nostrils, and with one eye turned anxiously in the direction of his companion, his thoughts went longingly back to Sober Sam and the dry, snug shack on the foot of Two-Fox Pond. He wondered

how many hours or days had passed since the morning of his departure from the shack. A haze of weariness passed over his mind every now and then. He wondered how poor Sam, with his cut foot, was managing to take care of himself. He would have to leave his bunk and hop about to do his cooking — and as soon as the supply of wood in the shack was consumed he would be forced to take his axe and hobble into the bush for more. And what was the poor old fellow thinking about his absence? And now Dick's mind turned to the skin of the black fox, the cause of his present strange and undesirable position. He had seen nothing of it, so far, in the den. Perhaps it was somewhere close at hand, so ill-lighted was the cave by day as by night; for that matter, it might even be among the skins upon which he lay. Forgetting the panther, he began to feel about beneath him with his left hand. From one part of the couch and another he drew out three pelts of moderate sizes, one of a beaver and the others of common foxes. He was about to search again when he was disturbed by the panther getting noiselessly to its feet.

The panther approached Dick's bed, stalking slowly through the gloom of the den. Four

paces it advanced; then it halted, and its round eyes shone like yellow lamps from the shadowed block of its head. Dick lay frozen with horror, knowing his helplessness with only his empty left hand for defence. But he gripped that hand into a fist, determined to put up a fight even against those hopeless odds. The great cat advanced another step and, instead of jumping forward, sank back quietly on its haunches. Still its pale eyes shone balefully. But Dick took heart at its attitude, for no member of the great cat family sits down to contemplate immediate mischief. So it sat for a long time, while Dick fairly held his breath with a dreadful anxiety. At last the panther yawned, then fell to licking the fur of his chest and fore-shoulders. Then he lay down, with his head not more than twenty inches from Dick's hand, and gave his attention to the cleaning and polishing of his paws. That job done to his satisfaction, he settled his chin on the floor and closed his eyes. For a little while Dick lay awake, thinking of this strange thing with wonder and thankfulness; but fever was working in him, along with the weakness caused by his wounds, and presently he, too, fell asleep.

It was day when Dick again opened his eyes. A long, low shaft of sunlight streamed through the mouth of the den and gilded a path along the untidy floor. The fire on the flat stone burned brightly with dry wood, and before it squatted Joe Banks, the wild man, broiling the red carcass of a freshly-skinned hare at the crackling flames. Beside him on the floor lay his notorious round, hide-filled racquets. Dick felt warm and comfortable just then, and his mind was in a happy state of vagueness that did away entirely with curiosity and anxiety. He lay quiet, watching his host at his crude cooking. He noticed, without much interest, that the panther was not in the den. He felt light-headed, warm, contented. He remembered Sober Sam as a friend of long ago, and the quest of the black fox skin not at all. He was vaguely, care-freely interested in the wild man and the broiling hare; but he felt no pangs of hunger. If there was anything for which he felt a desire at all just then, it was a cool drink. But he was not really thirsty. It was not worth the effort of asking. It did not matter. Nothing mattered. He really felt very comfortable and happy.

The wild man looked up from the fire, when the

hare was scorched and smoked to his fancy, and, seeing the invalid's eyes fixed upon him, arose from his cramped position and went over to the bed, grinning broadly. He carried the frizzled, blackened carcass of the rabbit on the end of a green-wood stick, and extended it toward Dick.

"Ye'll find this here good eatin', lad," he said.

"I am not hungry, thank you," replied Dick, weakly. "But I'm dry. Give me another drink of that cold stuff, will you?"

"Yarb tea," said the other. "Poor liquor, to my way o' thinking. But yer welcome to it, lad — an' it be doctor's orders, too."

He held the cup to Dick's lips. The lad drank eagerly, and felt better. "The doctor? whom do you mean?" he asked, awakened to a mild interest in life by the cooling draught.

"Doctor's dead," returned the wild man. "Aye, dead as that there bone." He scratched his chin under its thatch of whisker. "Aye, dead," he repeated. "Fine gent too, was the doctor. Rum killed him — in a manner o' speakin'." He shot a furtive glance at Dick. "Aye, ye may lay to that, lad. 'Twas the rum that done for him."

But already Dick's mind was wandering from the subject.

" Where's the panther? " he asked.

" Oh, him! " returned Joe Banks. " Jerry you mean. He's standin' his watch on deck. Aye, that's it, lad. Him on deck an' me below."

Dick's eyelids were sliding down and his wits were drifting away, wool-gathering in the languorous realms of fever-dreams.

" You talk queerly," he said drowsily. " You talk as if you were not quite right in the head. But I don't mind. I — I think I'll take another nap, if you have no objection."

" Not right in the head! " exclaimed Joe Banks indignantly. " Not right in the head, d'ye say? Me, Joe Banks, bosun, not right aloft! well, that do beat all. Just what doctor said, too, more nor once. But he died o' the rum — in a manner o' speakin'. Aye, jest in a manner o' speakin'. Twasn't him took the rum, ye'll understand. I'm the lad took the rum — an' that's what done for the doctor. Rare fine slush-artist he was, too. Great hand at the duffs he was — an' middlin' at a stew. But 'twas the rum killed him. Aye, 'twas the rum — in a manner o' speakin'."

He stopped his talk suddenly and looked

sharply and suspiciously at Dick. But Dick was sound asleep. The wild man returned to his place by the fire and ate the hare with a fine show of teeth and every evidence of a healthy appetite. That done, he placed more peat and wood on the fire, picked his teeth with the long knife that Dick had once found in the snow and had so so soon returned to him, and fell to mumbling and muttering. He looked more like a wild beast than a man with a name, crouched there with his tangled locks hanging about his face and shoulders, his matted beard and whiskers like the coat of a mountain sheep on his breast, and his great brown fingers scarred and hooked like claws. His keen grey eyes darted restlessly from side to side, and he mumbled strange words and the names of strange, far places that seemed to have nothing in common with the den in the frozen wilderness. While he squatted and gabbled the panther entered, devoured such bones of the hare as lay discarded on the floor, licked his great chops and slunk out again.

An hour passed. Joe Banks brewed himself a kettlefull of the tea that he had stolen from the shack. Next, he set some herbs in the fire to steep, so that drink should be ready for Dick on

his awakening. From a crack between two of the logs of which the extension of the cave was built, he produced a very black and very short clay pipe. This he filled with tobacco, shaving it lovingly from a mahogany-coloured plug which Sober Sam would have recognized had he been there to see. Having smoked the pipe to the last gurgling puff, he hid it away, placed fresh fuel on the fire and went to sleep.

Both Dick and the wild man were awakened about an hour later by the entrance of the panther. The big cat carried something limp and furry in its mouth — and attached to the thing in its mouth was a heavy article that banged and clattered along the floor of the den. The panther dropped his prize in front of the fire and sat down on his haunches. Joe Banks took the limp thing up in his hands — it proved to be a dead fox of the common yellowish red variety — and, calling both hands and feet into play, freed it from the trap and chain. Dick's mind, which was fairly clear at the moment, saw in this the secret of the mystery of the vanished traps. When the panther wanted an animal that happened to be caught fast in a trap he simply exerted his great muscles and took away trap

and all. It was not according to the laws of towns or the laws of the wilderness — from a trapper's point of view — but it was very simple and natural.

CHAPTER XVI

THE FEVER GRIPS DICK HARD. THE WILD MAN'S TROUBLES

The wild man skinned the fox, while Dick and the panther looked on. Then he tossed the skin into a corner and, producing Dick's belt axe, cut the head and legs off the carcass and tossed them to the expectant panther.

"Mind what you are about," said Dick. "You'll spoil the edge of that axe."

Joe Banks sprang into the air and gave vent to a startled yell; but the panther fell to on the tasty morsels that had been thrown to him, crunching away without so much as a glance at Dick or the perturbed Joseph.

"Ye be too middent in yer talk, lad!" exclaimed the wild man. "Ye set my narves all of a jig. Sounded jest like my old mate the doctor, you did — an' him dead, mind ye. Rare hand at talkin', he was — an' likewise at duffs and stews. Not a real doctor, ye understand, but a first-chop deep-sea cook."

"Where is he now? — and what ship did he belong to?" asked Dick.

"The doctor? Aye, ye may ask, lad — an' keep on askin'," returned the other, with a crafty smile and sidelong glance. "Ye'd like to know all about him, wouldn't ye — and about me too. But ye'll have to sail a long v'yage afore ye catch Joe Banks a-nappin'. Not there's anything about me I wouldn't tell to a bishop, mind ye. I'm white, I am, an' ye may lay to that. I've bin a bit rough in my time, maybe, what with rum an' shore-leave and maybe a touch o' sam, but ever since I come shore off the old Sea Robin an' let go my hooks in these here soundin's I've lived straighter an' more peaceable nor some maiden ladies."

Dick's attention was slipping, for he was a very ill man. "I can't quite follow you," he said. "You gabble along like some book I've read — and I don't understand what you are doing up here in the woods. Thought you couldn't talk at all when I first knew you. But I don't want to hear you talk, just now. What I want is a drink — a long drink — a cold drink."

"Aye, ye want a drink. Doctor was everlastingly wantin' a drink," babbled the wild man,

smiling foolishly and wagging his untidy head. "Board o' trade lime juice, stiffened with a dash o' rum was his fancy. None o' yer red rum, mind 'e, but brown Barbadoes rum, mild as milk an' as smooth as — as his own tongue. An' that same was my fancy, too; but 'twas rum an' a dash o' the lime juice with me. An' 'twas the rum done for doctor, sure's yer name be Peter Finch."

"But my name is not Peter Finch," returned Dick, wearily. "Give me a drink of herb tea, will you? And I wish you'd stop talking for a while."

"Aye, 'tis a wonder how all the words have come back to me, since I found ye on the land-wash, lad," said Joe. "If I was to tell ye how long it is since last I talked to a real live human — an' that was the doctor — ye'd call me a liar, like as not. 'Twas so long ago I don't know when it was."

"Give me a drink," cried Dick.

The babbler got to his feet, took the brew from the fire and carried it outside the den, where he set the old kettle in a mow-bank to cool. The panther followed him. Joe turned and gazed reflectively at the beast. "Bill," he said, "I'm sick o' this here port, an' why you and me don't

ship for some other clime is more'n I can say. Sometimes I know why we don't, an' sometimes I don't know. This be one o' the times I kin honestly say as how I don't know. My mind ain't what it was, Bill, when I sailed bosun in the Old Sea Robin. There was the doctor, now. Him an' me left the ship together. Aye, that's clear as A B C makes four. An' we brought something away with us. Now what was that, Bill? An' whatever it was, where is it now? An' where is the doctor, when it comes to that? I have it in my mind, Bill, now an' then, that I done somethin' to the doctor with a knife — which o' course wasn't right nor accordin' to regulations."

At this point of the one-sided conversation the panther turned and re-entered the den. The wild man gazed after him, scratched his head, then picked up the kettle of herb-tea and followed him. He poured some of the liquor in the wooden bowl and held it to Dick's eager and feverish lips. After draining the bowl Dick again drifted off into a heavy but uneasy sleep.

Dick tossed and turned on his rough couch, in the grip of a fever that had been breeding in his blood for days, the first seeds of which had been

sown by exposure and fatigue. It had been brought to a head by the struggle with the panther and by the wounds which the great beast had inflicted. Joe Banks watched beside him, giving him drink whenever he asked for it, and the panther hunted along the lines of the neglected traps. Dick talked sometimes, wildly, incoherently, and called his queer-looking nurse by many names. For a little while in the early mornings, Dick was rational though weak; but for five afternoons and nights his body was shaken by the fever and his mind went wandering. During all that time he ate nothing, but drank large quantities of herb tea. It was this tonic, cooling drink that saved his life, beyond a doubt. Sometimes, while he tossed and babbled, the panther lay beside his couch and the wild man hunted for food across the frosty wilderness outside the den; but at night it was always Joe Banks who kept watch. And sometimes Joe talked to those unheeding ears of the doctor, and of rum and ships and harbours with fine, foreign-sounding names; and sometimes he spoke of the doctor's death, uncertainly, wonderingly, as if he had no very clear idea as to how it had happened; and sometimes he laughed at his own

thoughts, and tried to sing deep-sea chanties and love-lorn ditties. But there were times — brief and infrequent — when the crazy light went out of his eyes and his endless, senseless babbling ceased. At such times an expression of horror and suffering came to his face. At such times his brain cleared and he remembered — remembered many things of many lands and seas, and years of suffering and loneliness in this frozen wilderness — but, most vividly and terribly of all, he remembered the death of his old ship-mate, whom he called the doctor. At such times he would pace the clay floor of that gloomy, untidy den, his great hands clinched, his great frame shaken by agonies of remorse and despair. Then he realized that he was an outcast, a murderer, a man lost to the knowledge of his kind, living in a den like a beast, seeking and eating his food like a beast, and with no companionship save that of a beast. And so, in a little while, his return to sanity would drive him back to babbling care-free madness.

Even during Joe Banks' hours of sanity much of his recent life remained blank to him. This was the case in the matter of Dick Ramsey's presence in the den. Sane, he knew nothing of

how the young man had come there; crazy, he knew that the panther was at the bottom of the stranger's troubles and that he, Joe Banks, had beaten the panther off and carried the wounded lad to the den. When in his usual state of mind — which was that of insanity — he not only knew something of Dick but knew of the shack on Two-Fox Pond and of Sober Sam as well. These things stood clear in his mind, hemmed about by mists and shadows. The memories of his life in the wilderness were mere fragments; but, during his brief seasons of saneness, his more distant past came clearly to his mind; but at these times all that he could recall of the more immediate past were such impressions as he had caught during his moments of sanity.

Joe Banks had sailed on many vessels, of divers sizes and models, to many parts of the world. He had made several voyages as boatswain of a barque named the Sea Robin — but this had not been the last vessel in which he had sailed, though the last to carry him under his real name. After years of honest seafaring, Joe fell suddenly to criminal courses. He was boatswain of the Sea Robin at the time, and the craft fellow known to his associates as the "doctor" was cook,

aboard the same stout craft. Dick was an old hand aboard the barque, however, and the cook was new. But the cook had sharpened his wits in the low quarters of many cities, and under many names, and cooking for the captain, mate and crew of the Sea Robin was only a part of one of his evil games. The barque, after a good passage from Nova Scotia, was nearing a certain hot and steaming port of Brazil, when the so-called doctor made known part of his game — just a little artistic fragment of it — to the boatswain. But by that time he knew the other's nature pretty thoroughly — and knew it to be weak as forecastle lime-juice. He told Joe Banks that the captain was carrying an extra dispatch-box this trip, and that this box contained four pearls of great value, the property of a once-great Spanish family resident near the city of Pernambuco. He knew a good deal of the history of the pearls, and so made a very interesting story of it. The Brazilian family had been hard pressed for money a few years back, had borrowed heavily from a Halifax merchant and had given the pearls into his keeping for security. Lately they had done well with their coffee and sugar plantations, and had been able to give the northern merchant part

of his money back and security for the balance of a less personal nature than the four pearls. And the pearls were now in the cabin of the Sea Robin, in a dispatch-box that was Captain Mann's especial care, on their way home to the once mighty family of Spanish extraction. When Joe Banks asked his friend the cook how he came to possess so much information on the subject, that mysterious gentleman simply winked one of his sly eyes and replied that it was his business to know.

There were two dispatch-boxes, strongly made and strongly locked in the Sea Robin's inner cabin. One of these, of course (the old battered one, beyond a doubt), contained the ship's papers and a small canvas bag of sovereigns — just the every-day contents of every vessel's dispatch-box. The other box (equally of course) contained the four wonderful pearls. So it happened that the boatswain and the cook took shore-leave and French-leave at one and the same time. It was Joe who made the actual theft, the while the artful cook stood by to give warning, with one eye on the mate beside the main-mast and the other down the sky-light watched the captain asleep in his bed. Then the two went

over the rail like shadows and ran up the wharf on noiseless feet. In the black, narrow street between two big warehouses the doctor (for let us call him by Joe's favourite name for him) possessed himself of the precious box. At the same moment of getting that article fairly under his left arm he turned and darted along the unlighted street. The big boatswain suspected nothing; but a passion for the box had grown in his heart. After a short, sharp run the doctor slowed to a walk.

"No call fer ye to walk right up on the back of my neck," said he. "When yer tired, doctor, I'll take a hand with the box," said Joe.

"Ain't tired, not a mite," retorted the other.

In silence they passed along many black and evil-smelling streets. The doctor's left elbow, under which was the small box, touched the boatswain's right elbow; and in that touch a shock passed to the latter's mind and spirit. He dropped back swiftly — a step to the rear and a step to the side — obeying the unreassuring shock. And as he stepped, the blade of a knife cut his shirt and just turned the skin on his shoulder. Amazed, afire with righteous indig-

nation, Joe replied to this incivility by hurling himself upon his companion, blindly, furiously and silently in the dark. They fell heavily upon the cobbles of the street, the doctor and the box underneath. The knife clattered harmlessly on the stones. The doctor struggled desperately for a few seconds, doing his best to connect one of his hard knees with the pit of his friend's stomach; but the boatswain got a grip on the wind-pipe with one of his big hands.

"Mer — cy!" gasped the doctor.

Joe relaxed his grip. "Ye tried to knife me, ye dirty sneak!" he cried.

"Keep quiet," replied the other. "You'll have the people awake — an' the police after us. Ease your holt a bit, bosun, an' I'll tell you how it was."

Joe Banks' amazing good nature (when sober) and credulity were large parts of his general weakness. He loosened the grip of his fingers still more.

"What ye got to say?" he asked.

"Well," replied the other, slowly and in a thin whisper, "I didn't try to knife you, Joe. Fact! I — I was just shiftin' my knife across to my other side — an' when you jumped

you give me such a start my hand kinder flew out."

The boatswain, kneeling astride his fellow-thief, gave this amazing statement his most deliberate attention.

CHAPTER XVII

THE WILD MAN'S PAST ADVENTURES CONTINUED. THE DOCTOR'S DEPRAVITY. THE EMPTY BOX

"I DON'T like it, ye may lay to that, doctor," said the boatswain, at last. "Looked to me like ye was tryin' to stick me. Queer way for to treat yer mate, doctor — him as took the risk to get the box from under the skipper's nose."

"Honest, Joe, it was an accident," returned the other. "Let me up, mate, for heaven's sake. Folk'll be findin' us here, if you don't — an' maybe the cap'n has spotted the loss of the box already."

"Just a moment," said the boatswain. "Where're we bound for?"

"The country," replied the doctor. "We want to get clear of this town just as quick as we know how. Then we'll take out the pearls an' chuck the box away. We'll hang around a bit out of sight, an' after a while ship for Noo Yo'k, under *nom de plumes.*"

"Under who, doctor?" inquired Joe Banks, suspiciously.

"Under names that ain't our own names. Under alleyasses."

"Right O! mate. Well, git up onto yer pins — but don't try shiftin' yer knife agin when I be along-side ye."

He removed his weight from the prostrate doctor, and that gentleman immediately scrambled to his feet. "I feel dazed," he said. "You slammed me down terrible hard, bosun, an' knocked my knife galley-west. Will you take a look round for it while I shake my wits together a bit?"

"No, doctor, can't say as how I will," returned Joe. "Far as I kin see, yer a heap safer man to travel with as ye are. That there accident kinder shook my nerve."

"You don't trust me, Joe," said the other mournfully.

"As far as I can see ye, doctor," replied Joe, cheerfully. "But on a night like this I can't see ye at all."

So they continued their interrupted journey; but now the boatswain walked behind his friend. Twice, before they got out of the sleeping city,

the doctor (who still carried the box) made a swift forward movement; and twice the boatswain's big hand flew out and gripped the back of his jacket.

"Tryin' to bolt an' leave me?" asked Joe, after the second time this thing had happened.

"I stumbled," replied the doctor. "An' no wonder, with you right on my heels."

Soon they felt dust under their feet; and black, overhanging gloom of walls and houses on both sides of their path gave away to the paler darkness of the sky. The two walked in silence, each busy with his own thoughts. The cook's were altogether selfish and vicious. He hated the boatswain — the simple mariner whom he had intended to use and then leave bleeding in the gutter. The tool had turned in his hand. So he hated him — yes, and feared him. His ribs and the back of his head were still sore from his recent fall. As he shuffled along through the hot, black night, he planned his companion's undoing. He made a dozen plans; and all seemed admirable. Any one of them could be easily carried out when the boatswain was asleep. In the meantime he trudged along, carrying the box gripped tightly under his arm.

Joe Banks was in a gloomier frame of mind than his companion. He mistrusted the man in front — after all, he was a comparative stranger — and regretted the mess-mates whom he had left behind aboard the old Sea Robin. Remorse stirred in him for the evil thing he had done. He had sailed two voyages with Captain Mann, and had always been treated fairly by that upstanding downright seaman. No doubt the captain would get into a peck of trouble over the loss of the pearls. As he shuffled along on the heels of the doctor, putting out an inquiring hand now and then to make sure that the slippery master of duffs and stews was still within reach, distrust warmed to dislike. He remembered the other's eyes — and his gorge rose at the picture. How had he ever been fool enough to throw in his lot with a man with such shifty eyes? And how much were the pearls worth, anyway? Enough to make the risk taken worth while?

" Look'e here, mate, let me carry that there box for a spell," he said, suddenly, distrust very evident in his voice.

The doctor halted. " Hey — what? " he whispered.

" Let me handle the box awhile."

"Oh, I ain't tired."

"Maybe not; but I'll just try the heft of it for a mile or so. The thing's mine as much as yours, I reckon. Hand 'er over!"

Joe Banks possessed himself of the precious box; and if he had followed the doctor like a shadow, step for step on his very heels, a little while before, it might be said that the doctor now followed him as a barnacle follows the bottom of a ship — as a man's scalp follows his head. He not only stubbed his toes against the boatswain's heels, but he fairly leaned his chest against the leader's back, and his hands hovered in the blackness on either side.

"Doctor," said Joe, "ye've got altogether too lovin' all of a suddent. Get off my back, for mercy's sake!"

"I ain't on your back," returned the other. "But I guess I have as good a right to keep close to you as you had to stick to me."

"An' safer for ye, too," retorted the boatswain. "I don't slash at my mates with a knife."

"You're a liar!" cried the doctor.

Joe turned swiftly and clutched him with one mighty hand.

"Oh, let go!" cried the doctor. "Don't be a fool, Joe! What's the good of you an' me falling out?"

Joe Banks turned, with a grunt, and the journey was resumed.

Dawn found the two in a land of narrow roads between vine-hung jungles. They passed two brown men leading mules loaded with sacks of sugar. They passed a cluster of low mud-and-wattle huts, and a hundred yards further on they came upon the clearings, bungalow, offices and boiling-house of a large sugar estate. They passed the open fields of canes, casava and coffee with quick and furtive steps and were soon between the green walls of the jungle again.

"Breakfast time," said Joe.

They sat down at the edge of the trail, with the box between them, and drew food from their pockets.

"I'm dry," said Joe, after he had dispatched a hearty meal of cold victuals of the doctor's own cooking.

"An' like to go dry 'til we get to the next nigger hut," returned the doctor, "for I ain't got so much as a drop of liquor on me. Forgot all about it in the rush."

"Then let's have a look at the pearls," said the boatswain.

"Oh, the pearls will keep. They're safe enough where they are."

"No, not on yer life. We want to look at 'em — an' we want to get rid o' that there box. Open up, doctor, an' then we kin each of us carry two o' the pearls."

"What's yer rush? I tell you, the pearls are all right where they are. What do you want to see 'em for, Joe? We'll lug 'em along the way they are until we come to a river, and then we'll open up an' chuck the box into the river. Now we'd better hustle along or the police will be after us."

They continued their journey, the doctor carrying the box.

"All the niggers in the country'll remember seein' ye with that box under yer flipper," grumbled the boatswain; but the doctor was undisturbed. Soon they came to a hut close beside the trail, hemmed around on three sides by the green jungle. The door stood open upon a clay floor and dusky interior.

"We'll get a drink here," said the doctor. He stepped to the doorway and looked inside. The

place was empty. He noticed a small, low window in the back wall. "Don't see any of the folks," he said, grinning at his companion over his shoulder, "but I do see a cool lookin' clay jug on the table. Guess I'll just step inside and borrow it."

"An' don't guzzle the whole of it, mind ye," said Joe, leaning wearily against the mud wall and feeling about in his pockets for pipe and tobacco. The doctor stepped into the dusky interior of the hut and moved with loudly stamping feet across the floor. The round-bellied bottle of clay contained water. He raised it to his lips, gulped greedily, tinkled an empty bowl against the side of it. Then, ceasing his noise quick as thought, he slipped over to the window, pushed the box through and let it drop to the ground, and hoisted himself to the sill.

The boatswain had his pipe in his hand, and was just cornering his plug of tobacco in a deep pocket of his canvas trousers when a sudden, swift suspicion flashed through him. Dropping the pipe, he sprang for the door and into the cabin. The doctor was half-way through the window, wriggling outward and downward in desperate haste. Only his feet remained on the sill, and his hands

were on the ground, when the boatswain clutched him by the ankles. With one mighty yank he was brought back into the room, cursing and struggling; but he struck the clay floor with a force that silenced him. Joe stared down at the limp figure for a second or two, breathing hard, his grey eyes glinting with anger; then he stepped over to the window, reached out and recovered the box.

"Lay where ye be, ye skunk," he said. He drank thirstily from the water-bottle and then, with the box under his arm, walked out of the hut and continued his journey up the narrow bridle-path. When the sun was directly overhead he entered a grove of mahogany trees, found a comfortable spot to rest in that was hidden from the road, ate what was left of the food in his pockets and smoked a meditative pipe. While he smoked his gaze rested on the small, metal box.

"The doctor's a dirty hound," he muttered. "Tried to knife me, he did — an' then tried to sneak away with these here pearls. Hope he got such a bang on his head he'll never see agin."

Then, finding two large stones, he placed the box upon one of them and beat open the lid with the other. Inside the box lay — nothing!

It was empty as the day it had left the factory when it was made. Empty! No pearls! And yet a theft committed, a good ship deserted, and an honest life ruined. For a long time the boatswain knelt under the mahogany trees and stared into the black, clean interior of the box, his lower jaw sagging and his eyes protruding in horrified incredulity. At last he sprang to his feet with a snarling cry, leaving the box on the ground, left the grove at a brisk trot and headed back along the way he had come. "The sly devil!" he muttered as he ran. "The dirty hound! He had a key all the time — an' he slipped it open an' took 'em out. No wonder he didn't want me to look at 'em! No wonder he wouldn't open the box for me to see!"

And now to return to the so-called doctor, the pretended sea-cook. Within a few minutes of the time of the boatswain's departure from the hut a brown woman, scantily clothed in soiled white, entered it and, seeing a stranger, white and foreign, sprawled senseless on the floor, turned about and made her exit at top speed. But she returned in a few minutes, accompanied by a brown man who smoked a brown cigarette. Just as they entered the hut the figure on the floor

began to move its sprawling legs, turn its head a little, from side to side, and moan. Sorely puzzled, the owners of the hut examined the stranger (gingerly, at first), and deciding that he was not dangerous lifted him from the floor, bathed his face and head with water and then held a bowl containing diluted white rum to his lips. The doctor opened one eye at the first sniff of the rum. Then he opened his mouth. But even after that reviving draught he did not feel altogether himself or quite clear in his mind. He fingered the bump on his low forehead and tried to remember just how he had come by it. Glancing about him, he noticed the window. Then he remembered.

"Where's my mate?" he cried. "Where's my box? Did you see big white sailor? Tell me, you black dogs, where's the bosun gone to?"

The natives gazed at him mournfully and shook their heads. The doctor, swearing vaguely, tried to get to his feet from the low couch upon which he had been lying; but his brain felt as if it were spinning around in his skull, his knees gave way and back he fell.

"More rum! More drink!" he cried.

They understood that and gave him more rum

and water. He lay still for twenty minutes or so, muttering and moaning, the while the native man and woman stood at a respectful distance and eyed him anxiously. At the end of that time he staggered up and reeled across the hut to where a long-bladed keen-edged cane-knife hung on the wall. He took this down, drew two silver dollars from his pocket and threw them on the floor, and staggered through the doorway and into the sunlit trail, the heavy, sabre-like knife flashing in his right hand. He kept to the trail for a distance of about twenty yards, then reeled into the jungle and fell. He got to his feet again, cursing like the traditional trooper, and again went down. The force with which his head had struck the clay floor of the hut had been terrible, and the white rum had not helped to steady the shocked brain or the wobbling knees. He lay flat, deciding to wait in the shade until his strength should return to him. Then he would travel far and fast and recover the dispatch-box containing those precious pearls. In the meantime, and quite unintentionally, he fell asleep. Thanks to his fatigue, sore head and the white rum, he slept a long time.

The boatswain was in a raging temper when he

reached the hut, and the discovery that the bird had flown did not improve it. He questioned the brown people, by signs and the few words of their language that he knew; and he learned that his mate had recovered, swallowed rum and water, possessed himself of a dangerous weapon and departed in an ugly mood. Which way had he gone? Up the trail, with murder in his eye. Joe felt puzzled at that information. If the doctor had the pearls, what was he angry about? But he was a sly lad, was the doctor. No doubt he was only pretending to be angry.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE WILD MAN'S EARLY ADVENTURES, CONCLUDED. THE FEVER LEAVES DICK

Joe Banks made himself quite at home in the hut of mud-and-wattle. He settled himself in a comfortable chair, planked a silver dollar and a ragged milreis note on the table and called for rum and cigarettes. The doctor had made a fool of him, beyond a doubt; but, after all, was it not better so. No one aboard the barque had seen him leave in the doctor's company; he had not so much as set eyes on the pearls; his past record was good, and so the captain would not suspect him of any more serious crime than that of taking shore-leave under cover of darkness. So he decided to spend the day quietly and pleasantly in the hut, and if someone from the ship did not find him by evening he would return and report himself, tell a simple little story, deny all knowledge of the doctor, take his mild punishment like a lamb, and return to his duty. His life was not ruined after all. So, instead of continuing his ravings against the doctor, he fell to congratu-

lating himself on being so safely rid of the thief and the incriminating pearls. He drank to his return to an honest career in the biting white rum. He was so pleased with himself and his rescued virtue (for that was his simple way of looking at the matter), that he congratulated himself often and wet each congratulation with a bumper of the native liquor.

The doctor awoke shortly after sunset. "Guess I'll not go any further to-night," he said. "I kin track that fool of a bosun easy enough to-morrow." So he got stiffly to his feet, picked up his cane-knife and started back for the hut. He entered quietly. A small lamp in a smoky shade stood on the table, and beside the table sat the boatswain, eating baked bread-fruit and roasted chicken and applying a clay bowl to his lips between every bite. His eyes were red and he rocked unsteadily in his chair. At the sight of him the doctor forgot his own weakness and stiffness and the other's bulk. With a snarling cry he raised his great knife and sprang toward the table. Joe reeled up drunkenly and overturned table, lamp, dishes and rum. The doctor tripped and fell in the mess, his knife in the scattered vegetables and his forehead against the

edge of the table. The spilled flame of the broken lamp leaped red across the thin clothing on his breast. Joe Banks, maddened with rum, and blind to reason and human instincts, swung up the heavy chair upon which he had been seated and brought it crashing down upon the other's neck and shoulders. Again he struck with all his weight — and again. Then the back of the chair broke in his hands, the flames leaped high, and a woman screamed. The boatswain stooped and turned the doctor over, singeing his hands on the burning garments. The face of the sly thief was the mask of a dead man, and all about him spouted the oil-fed, rum-fed flames. Then Joe Banks sprang away and fled into the darkness; and from that tragic moment his mind knew only occasional seasons of sanity.

The boatswain did not return to the Sea Robin nor was he ever found by any member of her crew. For days he roved about the bush and narrow trails behind the city, hiding in the jungle from dawn till dark and searching for food during the night hours. He did not know that the mud-and-wattle hut and the body of the doctor had burned together to featureless cinders. For days he ate nothing but raw sugar-cane and the native

fruits. He quenched his thirst with such water as he found. Fever bred and ran hot in his blood, and he would have died in the bush had not a young New Englander, part owner of a coffee plantation near by, found him and carried him to his bungalow. He, and his partner, an Englishman, nursed the unfortunate mariner back to a normal temperature; but they could not correct the sickness of his mind. After his recovery, Joe spent a month on the plantation, working at odd jobs. He was handy with tools and did some satisfactory bits of carpentry. He was kindly treated, and learned to feel warmly toward the two planters; but one night he slipped away, with his few possessions in a bundle on his back, a few dollars in his pocket and fleeting but vivid memories of the man he had murdered driving him on. He travelled blindly, and something that called in his heart brought him, after many days, to the sea. At last he found a port, and a north-bound barquentine short of hands. So he shipped (during one of his infrequent intervals of sanity), for the long voyage to Quebec, in Canada. Though he did his work well, having lost none of his knowledge of seamanship, the captain and mate and his companions in the forecastle soon dis-

covered his trouble. But he was a good sailor and did not seem dangerous, so the captain decided to do nothing until Quebec was reached. "Then I'll hand him over to the authorities, and they'll clap the poor devil into a mad-house, no doubt," he said to the mate.

During that long voyage (which was broken for a period of two weeks at the little island of Barbados, where the barquentine stumped her ballast of sand and took on a cargo of molasses) Joe Banks spoke often of his old mate the doctor. Of course he did not mention the particulars of that gentleman's untimely end. All his hearers could gather on the subject was that he had, at some stage of his hidden career, been on very intimate terms with a doctor who had a weakness for rum and who was not above cooking stews on occasion; so they got the idea into their simple heads that the big crazy man had once been in a position to mix, in terms of equality, with the "professional classes." The mate was deeply impressed by this. "Like as not, sir," said he to the captain, "he's a person of some importance. We'll certainly have to hand him over to the right people for such cases when we get to Quebec."

Long before the mouth of the St. Lawrence

"HE RAN DOWN A YOUNG MOOSE."

River was reached, something of the captain's and mate's intentions toward him had come to Joe's ears. "They'll put me in jail," he thought. "They've found out about the doctor." But he kept along at his work and did not mention his fears to any one. At last the barquentine reached the gulf and entered the great river. On the night of the second day on the river she lay close in to the northern shore. Then Joe Banks made a neat bundle of his modest belongings, helped himself to a tin kettle and such food as he could find in the galley, cut away and lowered the smallest of the boats and rowed ashore. He set the boat adrift as soon as his feet were on the sands, and without a backward look entered that vast and unknown wilderness. He was without fire-arms and his supply of food was insufficient for longer than a few days; but, crazy as he was, he was full of resources. He was mad, and loneliness and unknown dangers held no terrors for him. The privations through which he passed without injury would have killed a sane man. He ate berries and killed grouse and hares with stones. He ran down a young moose, killed it with his knife, smoked its flesh and made moccasins and clothing of its hide — for he had his sail-needles, palm and

waxed thread in his ditty-bag. He found a young panther in a mountain-cave, slew its devoted mother, and took possession of the cave for that first winter. He tamed the young panther and taught it to hunt for him. When spring came, he continued his aimless journey, accompanied by the half-grown panther. Within five years of leaving the ship he established himself in the den from which his expeditions were made that brought him to the notice of Dick Ramsey and Sober Sam; and year by year during that time his periods of sanity had become briefer and less frequent. But he was a master of wood-craft now, and even without the help of fire-arms was able to wrest a living from the wilderness. He was a master of the wild even as the wolves and bears were masters of it; but, being a man, he was master of the beasts as well. Cold, starvation, accident and illness were the menaces that lurked in the gloomy forests for him. Of the animals he had nothing to fear, for he was the master-animal of them all — a reasoner (in his mad way); an animal with hands; the possessor of fire and edged tools; the owner of a mind that could teach a mountain-panther to do his bidding — to hunt and share its kill with him.

One morning Dick awoke and found both Joe Banks and Billy the panther seated before the fire. Though his recollections of the past few days were hazy and fragmentary his eyes and mind were clear enough now.

"I am hungry," he said. "What have you got to eat?"

The wild man, who was suffering a season of sanity at the moment, approached the couch. He felt the lad's face and hands and looked into his eyes. "The fever has left ye," he said. "It has burned itself out. But ye must have a care, lad. I'll make ye some rabbit soup."

"Good. And please be as quick about it as you can," returned Dick. "I feel as empty as a drum. But what's troubling you, Joe? You look as solemn as an owl."

"I don't feel extra gay," admitted the wild man, sullenly. "This ain't what ye'd call a gay life, Dick — a-livin' up in this here God-knows-where country with a wild beast for a mess-mate."

"You are right. It can't be lively. You must join us at the shack."

"Oh! I reckon I be happy enough between times," said the wild man, uneasily. "It's when

I remembers things — all kinder old things — that I feel bad."

He returned to the fire, cut half a hare into fragments, which he placed in the rusty kettle to stew, tossed the other half of the little animal to the panther and then left the cave for more wood. When he returned to the den, a few minutes later, he was the cheerful, grinning lunatic again, his memories dimmed and distorted by a foolish mist and his conscience untroubled. He placed a few sticks on the fire, sniffed at the boiling meat in the kettle, scratched the top of the panther's head, and at last seated himself on the floor beside Dick. "I reckon ye feel better, lad," he said. "Well, I be glad of it, for this here fever kills more men nor rum. Aye, ye may lay to that — though rum has killed a fair few, here an' there. There was the doctor, now. We sailed a v'yage together, him an' me — an' 'twas rum killed him — white rum. Aye, that's so — but I don't rightly remember just how it come about."

"How is the soup doing?" asked Dick. "I could drink a gallon of it."

"Soup'll soon be ready," returned Joe. "Wish it was pea-soup."

"Why did you leave the sea?" asked the other.

The wild man glanced at him sharply. "I don't rightly remember — an' sometimes, lad, I ain't certain as I have left her. 'Tis only two nights ago — sure as I sailed bosun aboard the Sea Robin — I heard six bells go, natural as life. An' sometimes I hear the doctor — him as was mixed up with me in a matter o' a little rum ashore — knockin' the pans and pots about in the galley. Aye, lad, all as natural as life, an' ye may lay to that. An' I hear the surf every day — boom an' crash — boom an' crash — just like it runs into the reefs in them little islands I ust to sail to. So I reckon I'll sign on agin, some day, with Cap'n Mann o' the Sea Robin."

"That soup must be cooked by this time," said Dick. "Man alive, I can smell it. It'll spoil if you boil it any longer. Dish it up, man, dish it up. Pass the kettle along. Let me have a swig at it."

"'Tain't what ye'd rightly call cooked," returned Joe, examining the contents of the kettle, "but as ye be in such a way for it, lad, here goes." He poured the bowl full of the hot, thin liquid in which floated a few fragments of half-cooked flesh. Dick sat up weakly, clasped the wooden

bowl in both hands, sipped eagerly but gingerly until a little of the heat was gone from the soup, and then put away the balance in five great gulps. Then he forked up the pieces of meat with his fingers and devoured them with relish.

"Fine!" he exclaimed. "Best broth I ever tasted! There is more in the kettle, Joe. Give me some more."

The ex-boatswain shook his head and grinned. "No, ye don't," said he. "Ye can't come round Joe Banks with none o' that talk. I've seen fever afore, I have — an' many a good lad go as much as half a v'yage, maybe, without so much as a bite o' Christian food, an' then start in, all of a sudden, an' *bust himself* with eatin'. Aye, lad, that's gospel. Ye may lay to that. Queer thing, fever. Ye'll get no more o' that there soup afore the sun crosses the yard-arm."

"Oh! don't be a fool," said Dick. "To hear you talk one would think you were a doctor. How's a little soup — just another little cupfull — going to hurt me? It wasn't much stronger than water, anyway. Weakest stuff I ever swallowed. Come on, Joe — one more bowlfull! Just one, there's a good chap. Buck up!"

"Ye'd better lay down an' shut yer hatch," re-

turned Joe. "That's soup what is soup — altogether too strong for a sick man what's just escapin' from the brink o' a feverish grave. Nay, lad, ye've had yer breakfast — an' I must say ye gulped it most unmannerly. Reg'lar fo'castle manners, I must say. But if ye'll lay quiet for a little while, lad, I'll give 'e some more afore long."

"How soon?" inquired Dick, fretfully.

"Why, as to that," replied Joe, "just as soon as I come below agin. It be bosun's watch on deck, now."

CHAPTER XIX

SOBER SAM'S TROUBLES AND ANXIETY. HE SETS OUT, AT LAST, TO LOOK FOR HIS VANISHED PARTNER. A QUEER MEETING

To go back to Sober Sam, in the shack at the lower end of Two-Fox Pond. After Dick's departure, the old fellow pulled his blankets about him and resigned himself to meditation. This was all very well for a few hours; but noon and hunger awoke him to activity — that is, to partial activity. His reflective peace was broken. He lay and grumbled for another hour, then got slowly from his bunk and hopped over to the fire on his sound foot, the other hanging unsupported and aching dully. Hopping here and there, resting frequently and grumbling without cause, he managed to make a pot of tea and cook a scrap of dinner. With this and his pipe he returned to his blankets. The hours crawled past and the wintry twilight touched the little window. Darkness came, but did not bring Dick Ramsey. The old trapper's complaints grew louder and stronger. Again he left his bunk; and this time he lit the

lantern and set it in the window. He hopped to the door and gazed into the outer darkness. "I guess dat dam young idjit has gone huntin' for dat t'ief," he muttered. "He too a'mighty brave." He forgot to eat any supper and kept awake all night, suffering greatly from anxiety for his partner and not a little from his cut foot. At the lifting of dawn he fell asleep, and lay in the grasp of uncomfortable dreams of bad medicine and snarling panthers for several hours.

Sober Sam passed the day in a fever of helpless anxiety. By afternoon he was convinced that some grave misfortune had befallen his partner — that some one of the grim dangers of the winter-wilderness had found him. And here he was in the shack, as useless as if chains of iron bound him to the log walls. He could not put his foot to the ground. He could only hop about the shack and picture a hundred terrible things. He was fond of the young Englishman. Dick was his partner, his friend, his comrade in loneliness and hardships. It almost drove him mad to keep to the shack while Dick might be dying for need of him. He kept a sharp look-out at door and window and fired his rifle many times for a signal. Thoughts of the man in the bear skin and of his companion

the panther haunted him. What deviltry had these two committed? The day passed, and another restless night. In the morning he fed the fire with the last of the wood in the shack. Then he bound his lame foot in a blanket and hopped out, axe in hand. After two hours of suffering and severe toil he had enough wood cut and collected to feed the fire for another night and day. He returned to his bunk and slept heavily until long past noon.

The work of wood-cutting and water-carrying put the healing of Sam's foot back for a week at least. But anxiety did him more harm than the suffering in his foot. The days and nights dragged along. "Guess Dick is dead," he muttered. "But I'll go see, anyhow, soon's I kin put on two racquets. An' maybe I fin' what killed 'im — an' den I guess I settle for dat, you bet! Dick, he darn fine man — jes' like brother to me. Guess I raise hell a little bit in dis country if somebody kill my frien' Dick." Though his foot had been paining him more than usual for the past three days, he now discovered that he could touch it to the ground and even put some of his weight on it. But the muscles of his uninjured leg, overstrained of late by doing double service, pained

him a good deal. Since Dick's departure, Sam had not once thought of the traps. What were a hundred pelts — even a hundred of the priceless black fox — to the life of a brother? One day Sam spent a good part of the afternoon in working with one of his racquets. He set in new thongs, weaving them strongly, making an extra loop for the toe that was almost as wide as the frame. He did not skimp the work, for a great deal depended on its success. Beneath the new toe-loop he reinforced the netting of the racquet with extra thongs. That done, he set to work to make a mammoth moccasin of moose hide and blanket for his sore foot. It was big enough for two ordinary feet — for Sam had no intention of letting the frost get at his weak spot. He sewed the moccasin roughly but strongly. It was finished by supper time.

Sam was early astir next morning, though the lift of the new day brought no lightness of hope to his heart. Leaving his blankets in the morning was now nothing more cheerful than a matter of duty — of painful duty. He cooked and ate a good breakfast, made a pack of food, sleeping-bag and blankets, filled his cartridge-belt, cleaned his rifle and whet his axe. Then he clothed him-

self warmly, dressed his wounded foot as usual — in two woollen socks, a felt stocking and a moose-lined moccasin — and got the tender member ready for the trail. Over the inner bandage he drew a stocking of fine wool, over this two woollen socks, then a larger stocking of Dick's, then a felt stocking, then a sort of shapeless blanket case which he tied at the knee, and last of all the new mammoth moccasin. Now he put on his racquets — the one with the reinforced mesh and wide toe-strap on the lame foot — shouldered his pack, rifle and axe and left the shack.

Sam travelled slowly and rested often, taking no chances with his weak foot. He was glad to find that it carried him well and gave very little trouble. He set his course straight up the middle of the lake, where the way was level as a table. His intention was to hunt for the headquarters of the poacher in the bear skin and from that formidable person demand information of Dick. He felt convinced that the wild man or the panther knew what had happened to his partner; and he meant to find out what they knew — and act accordingly. All fear of that mysterious pair had left him. The only fear that he felt now was that he should never again see and speak to

young Dick Ramsey. He reached the swamp at the upper end of the lake without mishap, and there rested for the third time since leaving the shack. "Plenty of time," he murmured. "No hurry. Guess my ca'tridges 'ill keep a night. Guess I'll be soon enough for dat dam t'ief, anyhow. He won't scare me to-day you bet!" So he smoked his pipe and rested his foot for a good half hour. When he started on his way again he moved even more slowly than before, owing to the roughness of the "going" in the tangled swamp. He kept a sharp lookout overhead, under foot and on every side. Snow had fallen during the night, so he was sure of making no mistake between old tracks and new. Sometimes he halted, squatted with his weight on his sound foot, and listened intently. Where the tangled thickets of the swamp rise to the opened glades of the forest he came upon the familiar tracks of the round snow shoes. They were leading into the swamp, at a point a few hundred yards away from that at which he had come out; but their stubby tails pointed in the direction of Wigwam Mountain. Sober Sam glanced about him cautiously. "Guess I don't foller 'm," he muttered. "Guess I know de way he come from — an' maybe find his shack

and wait for him to come home. He t'ink dat a'mighty good joke, maybe."

So Sam took the back trail of the round racquets and plodded slowly onward towards the shaggy flanks of old Wigwam. But he halted frequently and looked back. The lower slopes of the mountain were still a long half mile distant when Sam felt the need of another rest. He lowered his pack from his shoulder, sat down on it and filled and lit his pipe. He had chosen his position for resting at a point from which he had a clear view of the trail for about fifty yards in each direction. The air was bitterly cold but the sun shone brightly. Sam smoked calmly, gazing placidly around as if he had come out for no other purpose than to admire the landscape; but across the knee lay his rifle, uncased. He was about to knock the ashes out of his pipe when the man he was looking for entered his range of vision, trampling on his round snow shoes in the very imprints of Sam's longer and more graceful racquets. Yes, it was the wild man! His head was bent, as if he inspected the trail. The great bear skin hung like a cloak from his broad shoulders. His absurd racquets lifted and dipped like the webbed feet of a water-bird.

Sam, at the first shock, let his pipe fall to the snow; but he stooped immediately, recovered it and stowed it away in his pocket. Then, smiling grimly, he got to his feet, faced the approaching wild man squarely and raised his rifle. The thief came on, his head bent, his eyes intent on the trail. He recognized the tracks as those of Sam's snow-shoes, and his poor, flighty misty brain was struggling with an association of ideas. He knew he had seen and followed these same tracks before. They suggested tobacco — yes, and they suggested the lad back in the cave. But they were not Dick's tracks. They could not be Dick's tracks. Ah, he remembered the little brown fellow now — Dick's mate in the big shack. That was a little man who smoked such good, strong tobacco. He must get some more of that tobacco soon. Yes, he must make a trip to the shack to-morrow — if he didn't forget. He raised his head, saw Sober Sam in the trail, and halted. He stood silent for a moment, then gave vent to that terrible, unearthly peal of laughter.

"You shut up!" exclaimed Sam. "You can't scar' me no more. You jes' the feller I was lookin' for. You better not try to run, neither, or you get shot. Yes, you bet."

The wild man stopped laughing and grinned silently instead. He looked harmless, though decidedly "balmy." Sam moved toward him, slowly, cautiously, his rifle ready. The other trembled, but held his ground. He wanted to run, and scream, and laugh; but he also wanted to know what the chances were for a pipefull of tobacco and if the little brown man had even met the "doctor" and what he had to do with Dick. His curiosity was stronger than his idiotic desire to run and set the woods ringing with his mad laughter. He remembered nothing of his former dealings with Sam — of the mad chase through the woods and the many bullets that had gone wide — though he had recognized the prints of the trapper's snow-shoes at a glance. His was a madness entirely without method. All his crimes against Dick and Sam had been committed in innocence, though with wonderful cunning. He had never visited the shack openly because a shyness of humans had grown in him of which he was unconscious. But he had become used to Dick — and this little brown man was in some way or other connected with Dick. In the matter of frightening the partners and robbing their traps the pan-

ther had been a more intentional offender than the mad sailor.

As Sober Sam drew near, the poor ex-boatswain began to stammer and lick his lips. He looked very foolish and very harmless.

"Got any baccy, mate?" he asked. "My pipe's bin cold a long time."

"You take me to your shack and maybe I give you some tobac," replied Sam.

"Did 'e ever sail shipmates with a lad called the doctor?" inquired Joe.

Sam shook his head. "Never sailed with nobody," said he. "What you talk about ship for?"

"Reckon ye sailed a v'yage with Dick, didn't ye, mate?"

"Dick? What you know about Dick? You tell me pretty quick! Maybe you kill 'im!"

"You wrong, mate. What d'ye think I'd kill him for — him or any other man? Joe Banks don't kill men, ye may lay to that. Dick's had yeller-jack, he has — an' he'd be dead now, an' tipped off the hatch into the sea but for my docterin'. Aye, that's gospel. Will you give me one plug o' baccy if I show you where Dick is?"

"Give you *two* plugs, maybe — if you show me Dick a'right."

"One pipefull now, mate," begged Joe, grinning hopefully and producing his black clay from somewhere in his shaggy clothing. "One pipe now, mate — an' then we'll go see Dick."

"You t'ief plenty tobac from me a'ready," said Sam. "An' you rob my traps, too, an' run me through de woods one-time. What for you do dat?"

The wild man shook his head. "Ye must be dreamin', mate," he said. "Joe Banks don't rob baccy nor traps from any man. The doctor, now — well, ye might call him a thief an' make no mistake."

"Where dis doctor, anyhow?" asked Sam, glancing apprehensively around.

"Oh, he's dead," said Joe. "Darn good thing, too."

"Guess so," returned the trapper. "But where dat darn painter?"

"Painter?"

"Big cat. Big cat what you hunt with."

"Oh! Bill. Well, mate, Bill's below, a'lookin' after Dick. I name him Bill because — "

"You take me quick!" cried Sam. "Quick!

Turn round. Maybe he chaw Dick dis very minute. Turn round, quick! Light out for home!"

The wild man gazed at him blankly for a moment, then turned with a shrill yell and bounded away along the trail — away from the mountain, away from Dick. Sam saw his mistake in a flash and started after him, leaving his pack in the snow. That he had frightened the poor, crazy fellow was easy to see. "You come back," he yelled. "Dat a'right. Plenty good tobac for you. You come back."

But Joe Banks was well started in panicky flight, and even the magic word "tobac" could not stop him while he was going at top speed. Sam ran well, carrying only his rifle; but for speed he was no match for the wild man on the round racquets. The trapper ran like a human and the other like some leaping animal; the one like a man with a game leg and the other like a sound-limbed stag.

"Hol' on! Hol' on!" yelled Sam. "Plenty tobac. Plenty tobac."

But Joe did not slacken his pace; and Sam snicked a cartridge from the loaded magazine of his rifle into the breech. He meant business. He had no intention of losing this connecting

link with Dick's fate and whereabouts for lack of a little blood-shed. But, just as he raised the rifle, a happy accident brought the wild man to a sudden halt. He had dropped his precious pipe.

CHAPTER XX

SOBER SAM FINDS HIS PARTNER. JOE GETS A FRIGHT

The wild man's clay pipe, which he had taken from its hiding place in the expectation of obtaining some tobacco from Sober Sam, and which he had kept in his hand during his unreasonable flight, had slipped from his fingers and fallen into the soft snow beside the trail. He stopped short, turned like a dodging hare and with a low cry of consternation began to search for the precious thing. He knelt, pulled his fur mittens from his hands and fumbled about in the snow. At that sight, the trapper lowered his rifle and slowed his pace to a walk. "Better keep cool," he muttered. "Dat crazy feller scar' a'mighty quick — quicker nor he ever scar' me." So he advanced calmly until within a yard of the crouching ex-boatswain.

"You lose somethin'?" he inquired. "You lose pipe maybe."

"Aye, mate, my pipe took a hop out o' my fingers," replied Joe, without looking up. "Only

pipe I got, too. She dropped somewheres about here, I'm thinkin'. Lend a hand, mate."

Sam took a careful survey of the snow at the side of the trail. About three feet further out than where the wild man was clawing like a dog unearthing a bone, he marked a short narrow cut in the otherwise flawless surface. He stepped out, sank hand and arm and produced the pipe. "Dis your pipe, I guess," he said, passing it over to its delighted owner. "Mighty fine pipe, you bet. Guess we have one little smoke now afore we go see Dick."

He drew a plug of tobacco from his pocket, his knife from his belt, and shaved off enough of the fragrant pressed leaf to fill two pipes. Joe Banks watched the operation with grinning jaws and dancing eyes. Soon both pipes were alight and blue wisps trailed upward in the sunlit air.

"Now we'll sit down, mate, an' yarn a bit," said Joe.

"No. Guess we better go home an' see Dick, smoke jes' as good walkin' as sittin'," returned Sam. "Den we have dinner, maybe, an' smoke some more."

"Right ye be, mate. We'll go home, we will, an' spin a yarn or two by the galley fire," agreed

the other, in high good-humour. They turned and started to retrace their steps, Joe in the lead. Sam reshouldered his axe and pack when they reached the place of their first meeting. In his anxiety to learn something of Dick, he pressed close upon the tails of his guide's snow-shoes, so close that the other had either to maintain a brisk pace or take the risk of being tripped. So the queer couple — the tall, long-haired, wild-eyed lunatic and the short, calm-eyed Indian — pressed forward toward the rugged base of Wigwam Mountain. The wild man glanced over his shoulder every now and then, grinning a protest at the other's speed. Once he said, " Ye seem to be in a rare hurry, mate," and slackened his pace for the fraction of a second. " Yes, I be," returned Sam, stepping on the tails of the leader's racquets. They reached sloping ground. The slope grew steeper and steeper with every yard covered. Now Joe kept inclining to the right, and soon they were on a beaten trail, unmistakable in spite of the four-inch covering of the last fall of snow. By this time they were well up the wooded flank of the mountain, and the trail did not give an inch to rough places or steep. Sam would gladly have slowed the pace now, for though

his foot had stood the strain wonderfully, thanks to its many dressings and wrappings, the very weight of those wrappings was telling on him. But Joe Banks had taken the hint and did not intend to have his heel stepped on again. Sam began to drop behind; and an awful fear that his guide would pass beyond his sight and then suffer another attack of crazy panic prompted him to exert his wits. The trail was steep and twisty, the old man's padded foot of formidable weight and feeling weightier with every step. "Time for more smoke," he called. "No good to go hungry for one more smoke."

The wild man glanced over his shoulder and saw the other standing with the plug of tobacco in his hand. He halted, expectantly. Sam withdrew the mitten from his right hand and produced his knife. "No hurry," he said. "What you in such a'mighty rush about, anyhow? You don't like good tobac, maybe? Your pipe still full maybe?"

"Reckon I kin stand another pipefull, mate," replied Joe grinning. After filling and lighting their pipes they advanced again at a leisurely pace.

"How much further? Pretty near there?" asked Sam.

" Aye, pretty nigh home now," replied the other and blew a shrill whistle on his fingers. The call was answered before the echoes of it had died away by a leaping grey shape on the trail ahead. At sight of it, Sam brought his rifle to his shoulder. Joe saw the motion and knocked the weapon from the trapper's hands with a mighty sweep of his arm. " That's Bill, ye d—— swab," he cried. " Don't ye go tryin' any o' yer backwoods monkey-shines on Bill."

Sam drew his knife. The panther crouched in the trail, Joe gripped Sam by the shoulder with fingers as hard as wood. " Ye'd better put that knife away, mate," he whispered, " or ye'll get yerself into trouble."

" But he'll jump for me," gasped Sam.

" Not him," returned Joe. " Wouldn't hurt a hair o' yer head, Bill wouldn't, if he knows ye be a friend o' mine. Put up yer knife quick."

Sam obeyed, though with evident reluctance. Joe loosed the grip on his shoulder and patted him on the back. " Look'e here, Bill, this gent ain't to be bit, mind that. Wouldn't try to harm ye for any money, he wouldn't. Take a good squint at 'im, Bill — an' remember what I say."

The panther straightened his legs, turned and

walked up the trail. Sober Sam was amazed and simply stood and stared.

"Now, mate, pick up yer gun an' come along," said the wild man. "Don't fret about Bill. Treat him polite an' he'll treat ye likewise."

"Yes, I treat him polite, you bet," agreed Sam, hastily.

Five minutes later they reached the mouth of the den. Joe pointed proudly to the low entrance. "Here we be, mate," he said. "Not much to look at, ye'll say, but good enough for a poor sailorman between v'yages. I've seen better an' I've seen worse. Now there was my old shipmate the doctor, he was allus cussin', he was. Said as how he was ust to better things nor his berth aboard the Sea Robin. Well, he got ust to worse — if my memory serves me. Aye, ye may well say it. He come to his end and in a worse berth nor the one he was allus cussin' at; but just how it all happened I've forgot. He wasn't a mate to be trusted, wasn't the doctor."

This babbling fell on deaf ears. Sam pointed at the low entrance of the shapeless, snow-drifted mound against the side of the mountain. "Is Dick in there?" he asked. "Is Dick in there?"

"Aye, there be a lad in there, in me own berth.

Aye, Dick's what he calls himself, mate; but how he come there I couldn't tell 'e," replied Joe.

The old trapper trembled with eagerness. Was it true? Was Dick really in there, — alive? He stepped forward.

"Hey! Dick! You there, Dick?" he called.

"Hullo," replied a familiar voice from within. "That you, Sam? Come in. Come in."

The old trapper sprang forward, dropped his pack and stooped to enter the den; but Joe Banks thrust him aside. "Me first," he said. "Bill in there, too — and perhaps he wouldn't act just right, at first, mate, if he seen ye comin' in too suddent."

So Sam drew aside and the wild man entered ahead of him, crawling in on hands and knees. Sam followed close, eager to assure himself by the proof of his eyes that Dick was still alive; but, with a half-thought of the panther in his mind, he carried his knife unobtrusively in his right hand. Just within the low den, the fore-part of which was built of logs in continuation of the natural cave that formed the rear part, he paused and gazed around, blinking his eyes in the darkness. There was the wild man just ahead of him, now standing in a stooped position; beyond those long

legs firelight wavered cheerfully but feebly; and by that swaying illumination he saw the panther sitting in front of the primitive hearth, as harmless and innocent as a kitchen ratter. Then, from the darkness beyond the panther, a lank figure advanced unsteadily.

"You there, Sam?" inquired a familiar voice. It was Dick. Yes, beyond a doubt, it was Dick.

Sam scrambled to his feet, snow-shoes and all. Dick grasped his hand. They beamed at each other in the fitful firelight. "Well, you dam queer fellow," remarked Sam. "I t'ink you dead, sure. How you get here I like to know."

"Never mind that now," said Dick. "I've been ill — and Joe pulled me through. But how is your foot? Heavens! it looks as big as a house. How did you get around to cut your wood and fetch the water?"

"Never min' dat," returned Sam, smiling. "Both still alive, anyhow — an' dat more'n we deserve, maybe. You look a'mighty like one old skeleton, Dick. Mighty glad to see you though, anyhow. Kinder t'ink I find your real skeleton layin' out on de snow. Well, how you feel, anyhow?"

"Oh, pretty fit — but hungry," replied Dick.

" Weak in the legs but amazingly strong in the stomach. I went five days just drinking herb tea, you know. Got anything to eat in your pockets? "

" Maybe," said Sam. " You let me get my racquets off, an' dis gran' bit moccasin, an' den we eat some grub. You not cook very fine dinner here, I guess. You eat it raw maybe."

Dick patted him on the back. Then, " If you'll excuse me, Sam, I'll just go back and sit on my bed. I'm still pretty shaky. Get off your things. Don't step on Bill's tail," he said. He retired and lay down on his couch of skins. Joe put more wood on the fire. Sam got his outer coat off and slipped his snow-shoes from his feet. Then he freed his lame foot from its numerous outer wrappings. This done, he looked around the cave with friendly interest.

Dinner was supplied from Sam's pockets and Joe's rusty tea-kettle. The panther dined off a bone that was none too fresh, After that, Sam and Joe smoked their pipes and all talked save the panther. He went out to look for another bone. All the rational conversation was between the two trappers, for poor Joe could think of nothing but ancient and hopelessly muddled

deep-sea adventures. But he was in a very cheerful frame of mind and looked upon Sam as an old friend. Dick told his partner of his one-sided fight with the panther, and of how the wild man had rescued him from certain death. Sam's round face lost a shade of its mahogany tint. "Maybe he try it agin," he said. "Dem painters mighty distrustful critters. He was all ready to jump on me, if dat crazy feller hadn't told him to quit. Guess I'd better shoot him sometime when his partner ain't lookin'."

"Don't you do it," exclaimed Dick. "Bill's a good cat, and he jumped on me because he thought I was his enemy. Now we're the best of friends. I tell you I'm really fond of him, Sam, and I wish I owned him. I believe he has more sense than poor Joe Banks ever had; but Joe's a good fellow too, though mad as a hatter."

"Dat right," returned Sam. "Queer t'ing you and me ever be scar'd of him. But he a mighty big t'ief, anyway, and I guess we better make him promise to leave our traps alone."

"Perhaps that is easier said than done," replied Dick, smiling. "I don't believe he knew that he was robbing our traps. He thought the traps grew where he found them, no doubt, and simply

took what nature so kindly offered him. And when he chased you that day, Sam, I believe he was really more frightened than you were."

"Maybe so," said the old Indian, "and maybe not so. He heap big fool, all right, but he know enough to pick out one black fox skin from whole lot more skins. He know good t'ing when he see it. Maybe you find dat fox skin afore dis, Dick?"

Dick shook his head. "No, I haven't seen it yet," he said. "To tell you the truth, I haven't thought for days. It is worth a lot of money, I know; but it seemed a very small thing to worry about when I did not know if I'd ever get out of this den alive. But now that we are both safe I suppose we'd better get to work at worrying again."

Sam looked grim. He was about to remind Dick that not a trap had been attended to within the last ten days or more when the wild man, who had been mumbling to himself about his friend, the doctor, brought his mind suddenly back to his surroundings and clutched the old trapper by the arm.

"Look'e here, mate, ye never told me when ye come ashore," he cried. "Nor what ship ye

belong to, nor if Cap'n Mann be still a-huntin' for me and the doctor in Pernambuco. Ye've bin yarnin' away to Dick there, an' never half a word for me." He shook Sam none too gently, and his eyes looked even more than usually wild.

"Tell him," said Dick. "Make up some sort of yarn. Tell him you know the captain. Hurry up. He gets like this sometimes."

"Dat's a'right," said the trapper. "I come ashore a mighty long time ago — from a ship dey call de Mary Jane. Yes, dat right. An' Cap'n Mann, he still huntin' for you. Yes, you bet. He say he wanter give you some money."

"No, not money," said Joe, quite calmly and pleasantly. "Ye off the course there, mate. Wasn't it somethin' about pearls, now? Wasn't he wantin' to see me and the doctor about four pearls?"

"Yes, dat right," returned Sam. "An' I see the doctor, too. He say he comin' up dis way to visit you, maybe." He was astonished by the effect of his flight of imagination upon the wild man — astonished and dismayed. Joe sprang to his feet.

"What's that ye say, mate?" he cried. "What's that ye say? Did ye see the doctor?

Did ye see him? an' did he name me — Joe Banks? "

Sam saw that he had touched a sore spot. He became cautious.

" Maybe 'twas 'nother doctor," he said.

CHAPTER XXI

SAM AND THE WILD MAN HUNT TOGETHER. SAM INQUIRES ABOUT STOLEN BLACK FOX SKIN, AND RECEIVES NO SATISFACTION

THE wild man stood on the clay floor of the den, towering above the astonished trapper, his eyes staring, his bewhiskered face a picture of dismay. "What did he look like?" he whispered in a shaky voice. "What did the doctor look like? Runt o' a man was he, with black eyes an' lantern jaws? Tell me, mate."

Sam reflected that this doctor must be a person of some importance in the wild man's past — and evidently a person whom the wild man was not at all anxious to see again — and a small man, it seemed, with black eyes and lean jaws. Well, he must get away from dangerous ground with all dispatch. He had a pretty clear head on his square shoulders, had old Sober Sam.

"I guess you make one big mistake," he said. "Doctor I see, he bigger no you, a'most, an' his eyes de colour of blueberries, an' his face fat as a

b'ar's ham in berry-time. He say to me, 'How my frien' Mister Joe, what I give five pills to, ten year ago, for de belly-ache?'"

Dick laughed long and loud. Sam smiled slightly — very slightly. Joe Banks looked at once puzzled and relieved. "Well, mate, ye've got me there," he said. "I don't recollect no such doctor as that; but my memory ain't just as good as it ust to be. I be glad it wasn't t'other chap ye met, anyway — for he's dead!"

"Hah!" exclaimed Sam.

"Aye, dead as nails," replied the wild man. "Dead as Jonah an' all the other kings o' Egypt. Dead as buttons. Aye, ye may lay to that, mate."

"Guess so," said Sam, nodding his head. "But you tell me, Joe, what you chase me for one day, all through the woods an' down the lake? Dat a'mighty queer way for you to treat a decent feller like Sober Sam."

"Ye must be cracked, mate," retorted Joe, warmly. "What would a peaceful sailorman like me be chasin' ye for?" He paused and passed one of his big hands across his forehead. "I don't know — I don't remember," he continued. "I chase so many things, mate — an' sometimes they chase me."

Dick shook his head at Sam. "And don't you try to remember, Joe," he said. "Sam gets queer notions into his head, sometimes. Of course you never chased him. Fill your pipe again, and tell us how you make that fine herb-tea that saved my life."

The ex-boatswain was calm again. He filled his pipe; but he did not tell them the secret of the herb-tea. His crazy brain was away again — far back and far away upon the rocking sea. He talked of ships, of captains, of storms and calms. He named old ship-mates and sang snatches of forecastle ditties. He spoke of hot ports with names that smacked of romance; of green road-steads and palm-fringed shores; of gales, half-gales and the blue sea matted with squares of floating weed. But he jumbled everything, flew from one subject to another and never brought a story to an end. He came to a stop at last, looked vaguely at his companions, laid a few sticks of wood on the fire and then crawled out of the den.

The trappers were left by themselves. Dick laughed quietly. "Joe's a queer chap," he said. "Mad — absolutely mad — but sharp enough about some things. He has seen some queer things

in his day — and done some queer things too, no doubt. And we are not ordinary chaps, Sam. Some people I know would not think there was much of a choice to make between Joe and you and me. Here we are in a den, anyway, with a mad man and a panther for our hosts. Now we are all four very good friends — and yet I owe what came very near to being my death to the panther as surely as I owe my life to the mad man. Sometimes, when I think of England, I wonder if I am dreaming it all."

"Mighty queer t'ings happen in dis country," agreed Sam. "But what matter, Dick, so long we don't get kilt an' get out in spring-time with good take of skins? Dat make it a'right — plenty good skins. Wish we find dat black fox skin."

Dick nodded. "I think Joe has hidden it away and forgotten about it. I'll ask him sometime. We'll have to work hard between now and spring, Sam, to make up for what we have lost by your accident and my illness — and Joe's robberies."

"When you ready to come home?" asked Sam.

"My legs still feel pretty wobbly — and so does my head," answered Dick; "but I think I'll be able to walk the distance in a day or two. Will you wait here until I am able to move, Sam?"

"Maybe. Stay to-night, anyhow, an' go huntin' with Joe in de mornin'. Want to tell Joe not to fool with our traps, an' talk to him about dat fox skin. Guess he remember, maybe, if I talk long time."

"Don't frighten him, or anger him," cautioned Dick.

"Guess not. Guess I know how to handle 'im now."

The afternoon passed uneventfully and Joe and the panther returned before dark. The supper was a scanty one, consisting of nothing more than a small broiled hare and a few handsfull of dried berries. Dick's appetite, good at all times, was especially keen just now. Sam felt peckish, too — almost as peckish after finishing his share of the hare and berries as before.

"Give us some more, Joe," begged Dick. "I call this a mean supper."

"Ye'll bust, yet," returned the wild man. "Never saw such a eater in all my born days."

"I'll never bust while I live with you," retorted Dick.

"Dat right," said Sam. "Maybe you got some more grub, Joe?"

"No more rabbit," returned Joe, "an' not

many more of them berries. But I kin give ye a fish if you want it."

His offer was warmly accepted by the trappers. He left the cave and soon returned with a large lake trout in his hand. It was frozen as stiff as a board. Sam thawed it and then broiled it on a flat stone at the edge of the fire. Joe had caught this fish, along with many more, in the lake called Smoky Pot, just after the first ice had formed, so it had lain in a frozen state for months and lacked much of its original flavour. But the trappers enjoyed it.

" If we had some of Joe's dried berries down at the shack we could make a pudding," said Dick, disposing of the last morsel of trout on the flat stone.

" No sugar. No molass'. How we make puddin', Dick? " asked Sam.

" Well, we have some flour left," returned Dick. " It would be pretty good, even without sugar. I'll try, when I get back. Now I'll turn in and get to sleep while I feel comfortable. If I stay awake I'll be hungry in another half-hour."

Sam and Joe sat and smoked by the fire, and the panther slumbered between them. After the

second filling and emptying of the pipes Sam spread his sleeping-bag beside Dick's couch and crawled into it. Joe placed wood on the fire, then crawled noiselessly to the low door-way, racquets in hand, and slipped out. The panther followed him. The air was still but bitterly cold. A small moon hung above the pointed tops of the forest. This was the time for hunting — for such hunting as was done by Joe Banks and his partner. They moved noiselessly along the white lanes, under the dense black shadows.

Next morning, after a breakfast of fish (for the night's hunting had been unsuccessful), Sam and Joe set out, leaving Dick and the panther to keep house. Joe seemed to be as ready for the expedition as Sam, though he had been awake all night, tramping in the snow. Sam carried his rifle and Joe was armed only with his knife.

"Mate," said Joe, "we want something big for dinner, or that lad Dick'll have a fit. What do ye say to one o' them big deer?"

"Moose? Caribou?" asked Sam.

"Ye've got me, mate. A seafarin' man I am, an' allus was, and havin' just been ashore a matter of a day or so I ain't got the hang o' the beasts' names yet. But I'll show ye where some o' them

big black fellers are in port. I'll do the showin' and ye kin do the shootin'."

"Dat first rate," said Sam. "You show me an' I shoot."

Joe led the way. They followed around the mountain for about a quarter of a mile and then struck straight down through the climbing forest of spruce, heading for the circular lake that is called Smoky Pot by the few people who know of its existence. Sam was not as familiar with the country on this side of the mountain as he was with the lake, barren and forests on the other side. Not once that winter had he been around the mountain. He followed Joe down among the shaggy trees in silence, keeping a sharp look-out for game on every hand. At the foot of the steep slope they entered a level of close growing cedars. They had not gone far in the gloom of this dismal forest before Joe Banks halted and turned. Sam halted too, struck by a great alteration in the other's eyes and face. The wild man was not grinning now and his eyes had lost their crazy gleam.

"Look'e here," he said. "What — what are we doing? and who be ye? An Injun? A trapper? Be ye takin' me somewheres?"

Sam was astonished; but he tried not to show it. He saw, in a moment, that something of the wild man's old sanity had come back to him. "Yes, I'm a trapper," he said. "You an' me very good friends. You take me down here somewheres to shoot moose you know about — big animal a'mighty high in de shoulders."

The other nodded. "Yes, I remember seein' them t'other side that lake, in a place all trampled flat. But some things I see an' do I forget all about. I don't remember ye, mate."

"You remember Dick, maybe?"

"Aye, Dick is sick with the fever. He's layin' in my camp, on the mountain aft there. Be ye any kin to Dick?"

"Dick my partner. But now you take me to moose yard an' I shoot a moose maybe. Sober Sam good frien' to you, like you was to Dick. He give you half de moose — if we shoot him."

"Who is Sober Sam?" asked the wild man, mournfully.

Sam slapped his own chest with a mittened hand. "Me," he said.

"I've been in this forsaken country a long time," said the other. "I don't know how long — don't know what for. It is bad — bad! But

sometimes I forget. Then I don't feel so bad. I — I was a sailor — long ago." He paused. "If ye want to shoot one o' them beasts I will take you to the place. T'other side the lake, it is — place all trampled flat," he added.

"A'right," returned Sam. Then it came to his mind quick as a flash, that now was the time to inquire about the stone black fox skin — now, when the crazy man seemed half sane. "Hol' on!" he exclaimed. "You see little black skin, maybe? Skin of black fox? You see one, maybe, in shack on my pond, t'other side dat mountain?"

Joe shook his head. "No — no, I was never in yer shack. I seen it, once — but I was never in it. I never seen a black fox skin — not to remember. Fox? Black fox? No, mate, — I can't remember it." He turned, at that, and started forward.

"Hol' on," begged Sam. "You try to remember. Black fox. You try."

Joe turned his head over his shoulder. "Go to hell!" he snapped. Then he continued on his way through the cedars; and the old trapper followed him, silent and crestfallen. They cleared the heavy growth and passed out of the gloom into the glare of sunlight on the white level ex-

panse of the lake. They were half way across the lake before another word was spoken. Then the wild man halted and turned. He was grinning. There were queer, irresponsible gleams and twinklings in his grey eyes. The sad, puzzled, short tempered boatswain was gone and he was nothing but the crazy, good-natured wild man again. "Got any baccy, mate?" he inquired, producing his pipe from somewhere among his hairy garments.

"Yes," said the trapper, relieved at these signs of his companion's return to harmless insanity. "Yes, I got some, a'right. But we go on. We don't smoke now, we go over to moose yard an' shoot one moose, like you say."

"Moose?" inquired Joe.

"Yes, moose. Big animal — big horns, maybe — but not now — fine to eat, anyhow. You show me one moose an' I shoot 'im. Den you an' me cut him up."

"Right O! mate. Then we'll have a smoke. Keep in my track an' I'll soon show ye the moose. Aye, that's sense, that is! Then we'll have a smoke."

They plodded on, across the crisp, glistening snow, their eyes almost blinded by the glare. The

sun was warmer now — possessed of warmth as well as light. It seemed larger, too, and instead of being colourless, like ice or glass, it had a yellow glow in the centre and around the rim of it that did one good to see. The long, still, frost-bound, frost-shrouded winter was drawing to an end even up in this far northern wilderness — slowly, it is true, but surely, surely. As yet, there was no shrinkage of the snow, no loosening of icy fetters; but the days lengthened and the white eye of the sun showed a pupil of fire.

Sam and the wild man crossed the white level of Smoky Pot and slipped noiselessly into the big timber. Soon they came to the out-flung trails of the moose-yard. Here Sam thought it well to halt and wait, though Joe was for breaking into the very centre of the yard. They crouched side by side, no living thing in sight. "You ever kill any moose here?" whispered Sam. Joe shook his head. "Ever kill one anywhere?" continued Sam. The other nodded. "Aye, mate, that I did," he answered. "Many a time I've knifed 'em, in the deep snow. But it's hard work, ye may lay to that."

At that moment a bulky, high-shouldered, black-headed form appeared on one of the deep

trenches. It was a bull, Sam saw, three years old or thereabouts. It had dropped its antlers — as the moose and caribou do every year, only to grow new sets.

" Dat feller good 'nough for us," breathed Sam, raising his rifle.

CHAPTER XXII

THE MOOSE. DICK'S RIFLE AND SOME TRAPS COME TO LIGHT. THE CROWNING DISCOVERY

Joe Banks drew his long knife and crouched low like a panther ready to spring upon its prey. Sam, steady as a rock, brought his sights in line against the black neck of the bull moose. The big beast was standing perfectly still, head up, sniffing and questioning the motionless air with long, trembling nostrils. The rifle snapped, bitter and sharp. The moose swayed in the deep trail, lowered its head, staggered forward a pace or two and then sank on its knees. Blood spurted out upon the snow, melting deep as it touched. Joe sprang from cover with a shrill cry, knife in hand, eager to dispatch the victim of his comrade's rifle. The bull came up on all four legs again, with a surge and a plunge, flung himself out of the trail into the unpacked snow, and dashed forward upon the hairy man with the long knife. Joe sprang aside. The great beast plunged after him, its little eyes snapping with red rage. Joe fouled

one of his round racquets in some drifted brush and fell sprawling, arms and head buried deep. Sam shifted his position a little and again brought his rifle to his shoulder. At the second report the moose fell again; but this time he lay still, his big head within an inch of the struggling wild man. Then Sam laughed. "He pretty near catch you," he said. "You too darn reckless, Joe. You like Dick."

They set to work to skin and cut up the moose without loss of time. As it was quite out of the question for them to carry the big hide and all the flesh away in one trip, they fastened half the carcass in the branches of a spruce-tree, well out from the trunk and ten feet from the snow. It was close upon noon when this work was done; so they moved away from the outskirts of the moose-yard, gathered dry wood and built a fire, and set a slice of the fresh meat to broil and a kettle-full of snow to melt. Then they filled their pipes and lit them with blazing twigs from the fire. Joe grinned and smoked and Sam did the talking. He talked with a purpose, and by easy and natural turns brought up the subject of black foxes. There might be a chance, he thought, that the crazy Joe Banks would know something of what

the sane and morose Joe knew nothing. At last he asked point blank, if Joe had the skin of a black fox in his possession.

"I did have three or four once," replied Joe. "Aye, ye may to that, mate — three or four. Fine skins they was too." Sam stared. "T'ree — four black fox skins?" he asked, incredulously.

The other nodded. "But I forget where I put 'em — what I do with 'em," he said. "My memory ain't as good as it ust to be, mate."

"Where'd you get 'em?" asked Sam, eagerly.

The ex-boatswain looked puzzled and distressed. "Honest, mate, I can't tell ye," he said. "I can't say how or where I got them or what I done with 'em. My head's gone that queer of late, I kin scarce remember anything. Black fox? Aye, there's something in that. I remember something about it, mate — but I can't say exactly what it be I remember."

"Dat too bad," returned Sam. "I give you two plugs of tobac if you remember 'bout dat fox skin. Yes, you bet. T'ree plugs, maybe."

Joe sighed. "I'd tell ye if I knew, mate," he said, earnestly. "But perhaps there ain't nothin' in it at all — perhaps I never seen one o' them skins in all my life. My head's queer, mate, an'

no mistake. It gets queer notions into it — an' I don't know where they come from. But about the black fox skins! Now, that do beat all! Was it aboard the Sea Robin or in Pernambuco? — or in Liverpool? — I seen three or four fine black skins. No, I reckon I was dreamin', mate."

"You dream a little harder an' I give you four plug of tobac," said Sam, glancing keenly at his companion. He had an idea — an unfair idea — that the wild man's memory was not quite as bad as he pretended. But it was of no use. The harder Joe put his mind to the subject, the dimmer and more unsatisfactory became his memory. At last he even forgot what it was he was trying to remember about. The subject of his mental exertions slipped his mind. Then he gave it up with a frisky skip on his round snow-shoes and a shrill crow of laughter. So Sam gave it up too — for the time. They reached the den without accident and fried a slice of moose-meat for the hungry Dick. Bill, the panther, ate his portion raw. While Sam watched Dick eat, the wild man clawed about among the brush and poles that roofed the man-made part of the den. At last he dragged Dick's rifle, belt and belt-axe into view.

"Hah! Those are mine!" exclaimed Dick,

letting a fragment of burnt steak drop from his fingers.

Joe stepped over and handed them to him. "Ye're welcome to 'em, lad," he said, "but how they ever come to be in my roof is more nor I kin say. That there little hatchet kind o' catches my eye; but ye're welcome, ye're welcome."

"You put them there yourself," replied Dick. "Surely you remember that."

"No, lad, I don't remember. But what does it matter?"

"You can have the belt-axe — the little hatchet," said Dick.

Joe was delighted. He felt the edge of the blade with his thumb and grinned at its sharpness. Sober Sam watched him closely all the while. Suddenly he said, "You hunt up there in de roof agin, Joe. Maybe you find something more don't belong to you."

The wild man returned to the hiding-place in the roof without hesitation or protest, and fumbled about. He produced a steel fox-trap, chain and all — another — even a third. "Blast my eyes!" he exclaimed. "What sort o' gear d'ye call this?"

"Traps," said Sam, his eyes twinkling. "Our

traps. T'ank you very muchly. What else you got up there? Try agin."

Dick began to laugh, and even Bill the panther looked amused. Joe grinned broadly and thrust both arms into the ceiling again. After a great deal of fumbling about and grunting he produced one more trap. That was all. He seemed highly pleased with himself. "Ye can have 'em," he said, kicking the heap of traps on the floor. "They ain't no good to me an' Bill, mates."

Dick thanked him; but Sam was too deep in thought for words — just then. He looked up after a minute or two, however, and asked, "You got some other place you put t'ings away?" But Joe did not give a satisfactory answer. He had already forgotten the amusing incident of the traps and, grinning vaguely at the old trapper, he began to talk of the sea and the tropics. This he kept up until Sam nudged him in the ribs. "We better go an' get 'nother load of moose-meat," he said. Joe looked vacant, but followed him from the den. The panther went with them and Dick was left alone, to clean his rifle with a rag from one of his torn shirts (Bill's claws had torn the shirts), and to congratulate himself on the return

of weapon and traps. In spite of the loss of the black fox skin they might have a good "take" of furs to show for their winter's work and hardships, after all. There was no doubt that the wild man had taken the precious fox skin from the shack, only to hide it away and then forget its whereabouts; but that was a small matter to set against his days of tender, though erratic nursing. True, it was Joe's fault that he had been brought to a state that had required nursing (but for Joe, the panther would not have been in the country at all) and the two had cost him many hours of worry and many dollars' worth of fur; but now he felt only the most kindly emotions toward the wild man and the panther. His strength was returning to him with every hour, and again he looked out on life with the interest and hopefulness of youth. He and Sam would soon be at work again; in a month or two the rivers would open and they would take their pelts down to the settlements and exchange them for the currency of the country. Yes, even counting on the loss of the black fox skin it would turn out a profitable venture. And then the fun he had shared in, and the grim risks he had taken, and the things he had learned. How the eyes of his

friends at home would protrude if they could hear of this winter on Two-Fox Pond.

The others returned shortly after sunset, carrying the remainder of the moose. Then dinner was cooked, pipes smoked, and all four drifted off into the region of dreams. Even the panther did not hunt that night. What was the use of trailing through the woods all night when a little brown man with a rifle could fill the den with meat between breakfast and dinner? After breakfast, Sam said that he must get back to the shack on Two-Fox Pond with some of the moose-meat and the recovered traps. The wild man volunteered to go with him; and that was just what the old trapper was feeling for. He wanted to treat Joe well, to make a good impression on him by means of tobacco and tea, and continually jog his flighty memory with the subject of the black fox skin. That skin was worth taking a good deal of trouble about. So Sam and Joe filled their pipes and set out like old friends, leaving Dick and the panther to keep house. The day was fine, and the snow well packed by sun and wind. They reached the shack within two hours and a half of leaving the den on the mountain; for, though Sam's foot was feeling

in first rate condition, thanks to the number of socks he wore and the big moccasin, he did not run any risks with it among the tangled thickets of the swamp. When Sam unfastened the door of the shack, Joe began to look shy and edged away. Sam noticed this out of the corner of his left eye. "Come in," he said, and entered without looking around — and yet he was terribly afraid that the crazy fellow would bolt with the moose-meat on his back. He went straight to his bunk, got a stick of tobacco from under the spruce boughs that formed his mattress, and with this in his hand returned to the door. He saw Joe about ten yards away, gazing at him over the top of some brush. "Here your plug of tobac — mighty good tobac," he said. "Time for 'nother smoke, too."

Joe left his cover at that and advanced, grinning broadly. He possessed himself of the tobacco without entering the shack.

"You come in, we smoke inside," said Sam. He soon had a fire crackling, and by that time Joe was standing in the middle of the shack, his round snow-shoes still on his feet, staring around him. Sam divested him of his pack of frozen meat. He persuaded him to take off his racquets and then, feeling easier in his mind,

he took the meat outside and put it up on the roof, in a hole in the crusted snow.

Joe soon began to feel at home, and puffed away at his pipe in quite his old jovial manner. Suddenly he said, "Mate, I reckon I was here afore, once. This place looks familiar, an' no mistake."

"Yes, you here before, I guess," replied the wily old trapper. "You come in one day an' look over our skins."

Joe nodded his tangled head. "Aye, that's right, mate — or else it was a dream. I get that mixed, sometimes, I don't know if I've bin dreamin' or really doin' things."

"No, you not dream," said Sam. "You here a'right. You look at skins — chuck 'em all 'round de place — an' you pick out one black fox skin. What you do with dat black fox skin?"

Joe got up from his seat on the edge of Dick's bunk and began wandering about the shack with a puzzled but hopeful expression on such portions of his face as were visible among the whiskers. He examined the walls, the floor and the low roof — Sam watching him intently all the while. At last he went to Sam's bunk, knelt upon it and

clawed away several hand-fulls of the moss with which the wide cracks between the logs were "chinked." Then he wedged his hand into the crack and presently pulled out the lost black fox skin, dry, glossy and undamaged. "Here be one o' them," he said, dropping it on the bunk and again thrusting his hand into the crack between the logs.

Sam sprang from his seat by the fire and snatched up the precious skin. He examined it carefully, fearing that it might have come to harm in its narrow hiding-place; but with his mind at rest on this point he began to caper about the floor, chuckling with delight. He stopped suddenly, seeing Joe still fumbling about with his gnarled fingers between the logs of the wall. "What you doin' now?" he asked. "What you lookin' for now?" Joe turned his head. His brow was puckered with the concentration of his thoughts. "There be more o' them black skins somewhere, mate," he said. "Sure as ye live, there be more somewheres."

"In dis shack?" cried Sam. "More in dis shack? In de walls you t'ink?"

"I can't say for sure where they be," returned the other. "But I kinder remember more o'

them knockin' about. Queer, how my memory gives out."

"Did you hide some more black fox skins in dis shack?" cried Sam, in a flutter of eagerness. "Where you get 'em all anyhow? Me an' Dick only trap one — dis one. You t'inkin' double, I guess."

Joe shook his head. "I dunno, mate," he said. "I don't remember very good, now-a-days. But it do seem to me I seen more o' them black skins somewhere, some time or other. Aye, ye may lay to that, mate."

Sam did not know just what to make of this. Of course Joe had hidden this skin in the wall on the same day that he had sorted it out from among the other pelts; but even if other black fox skins were in his possession it was not likely that he had hidden them in the shack. But there was a chance of it. Who could say what tricks a crazy fellow like Joe might be up to?

CHAPTER XXIII

FLAP-JACKS. DICK RETURNS TO THE SHACK. JOE REMEMBERS TO SOME PURPOSE

SOBER SAM spent two hours in picking the moss from the wider cracks in the walls of the cabin, feeling about between the logs, and then wedging the moss back into place. Joe watched him for part of the time, puzzled but interested; but after an hour of it he returned to the warm hearth and babbled to himself about his seafaring past. Sam looked rather sheepish after he had finished the job of unchinking and rechinking the walls. "Darn fool!" he muttered. He cooked a good dinner (as dinners go in that wilderness when the supply of "store grub" is almost come to an end) and they topped it off with tea and pipes. Joe, of course, ate more than he should have, and fell asleep by the fire as soon as his pipe was smoked to the heel. Sam took this opportunity to hide the black fox skin in a safe place, for there was no saying how soon the wild man might try his hand at pilfering again. After Joe had snored

and grunted for about an hour and made many whimpering, dog-like noises in his dreams, Sam awakened him. They put on their snow-shoes and outer coats, took up the traps and some meat for bait, and set out to make good part of the damage caused to the lines of traps by neglect and Joe's wholesale robberies. They set about three miles of the westward line to rights, finding that such traps as had not been troubled by Joe and the panther had been visited by a wolverine. But Sam did not grumble. Dick had been found, alive and almost well, and the black fox skin was in the hands of its rightful owners again. Prospects looked brighter — and spring-time was near.

Joe set out for the den, after supper. The woods and lonely barrens were as safe for him, and as undaunting, by night as by day. Sam remained at the shack, for the morrow promised to be a busy day with him.

Sam started for the mountain early next morning; but he took the trail through the heavy timber along the left hand shore of the lake, and reset such traps as he could find as he went along. He carried his rifle and axe, a frying-pan, a tiny bag of flour, a little fat pork, baking-powder and a small package of currants. These were all

fastened neatly in his rolled-up blankets; and in a pocket of his jumper lay a pot of beef extract, a little tin of salt and a tin of condensed milk. He should have had some sugar or molasses, too; but not a grain or a drop of "sweet'nin'" remained in the shack. "Guess Dick need feedin'," he reflected, as he trudged along. "Change of food what he want — and one good belly-full of flap-jacks make him strong as ever, maybe." He reached the den in time to take the cooking of the dinner in hand. First of all, he made beef-tea for Dick, in hopes of blunting the edge of that young man's appetite before the flap-jacks appeared. Dick drank the beef-tea in two winks and asked Joe for the rest of his dinner quick. "You hol' on," said Sam. "You goin' to get a mighty fine dinner to-day — best you get for long time."

He mixed up a batter in Joe's rusty kettle — a batter consisting of flour, water, baking powder, condensed milk, salt and currants. The others watched eagerly. Sam rubbed the frying-pan well with the fat pork, and placed it on the fire.

"Hi, mate!" exclaimed Joe, "don't ye go an' spile it now by fryin' it. Put the kittle on the fire, just as ye have it, an' then we'll get a good

plum duff. Aye, a plum duff just like the doctor ust to make aboard the Sea Robin."

"I cook dis. Doctor ain't cookin' dis grub," returned Sam, scornfully. He tested the heat of the pan and rubbed on more fat. "Guess dat a'right," he said. "Now gimme elbow-room. Can't make flap-jacks with two big men an' one painter hangin' over my shoulders."

Sam poured enough of the batter from the kettle to cover the bottom of the frying-pan. It sizzled as it ran and spread over the hot, well-greased pan; bubbles quickly appeared and burst on the creamy surface; the edges showed a narrow line of brown and a fine scent filled the air. "Time to flip! Don't let it burn!" cried Dick.

"You never mind," said Sam. "Dis dinner *my* business, I guess." He ran the point of his knife around the edge of the batter; then withdrew the pan from the fire and gave it a sharp upward jerk and twist. The sound, limp cake jumped into the air, flapped over and descended again to the pan, now brown side up. An exclamation of relief escaped Dick at the success of the operation; and Sam, with a modest smile, replaced the pan on the fire. That flap-jack was soon removed from the pan and placed on a clean

sheet of birch bark on the hearth-stone, to keep warm, and more batter was poured from the kettle. There was enough batter to make ten flap-jacks, each about eight inches in diameter and a quarter of an inch thick. Dick ate four of them; and then, seeing that his chances for more were not promising, he cleaned out the kettle and made himself another pint or so of beef-tea. Joe ate his flap-jacks in silence. Then he licked his fingers.

"Mate," said he, "them little kickshaws beat any duff that ever was biled. Now who larned ye to make 'em, I'd like to know. 'Twasn't the doctor, I'll give my Alfy Davy to that."

"Yes, they were good — but mighty few of them," said Dick.

Sam still had a fragment of the last flap-jack in his hand. He looked at Bill the panther, who was gnawing on a bone with an injured, left-out-of-it sort of air. Joe saw the look. "Don't 'e give it to Bill, mate," he cried, "or he'll be wantin' the like o' it three times a day. By jinks, mate, I'll take it myself if ye don't want it."

Sam shook his head and devoured the last fragment.

Sam spent the night at the den; and in the

morning Dick declared himself ready for the journey to the shack. By the time he had dressed himself for the outer air, however, and fastened the thongs of his snow-shoes, he did not feel quite so fit. But as the others were ready and waiting, he would not draw back. The sun was well above the tree-tops, in a clear sky, and a brisk wind was blowing from the fair-weather quarter. The sunshine almost blinded him and the frosty wind seemed to snatch the breath from his nostrils; for he had been in the gloom of the den many days, and for many days without food. The gigantic meals of the last few days had really not done as much for him as one would suppose. His legs felt terribly weak and his head light as a feather; but Sam and Joe started along the trail and he staggered after them. Bill, the panther, slunk along at his heels.

Dick's head soon began to feel more solid, and among the thick trees through which the trail led, twisting down the mountain, the wind lost half its force and the sunshine was subdued to a green gloom; but the weakness at his knees did not improve. He found that he had about all that he could do to lift his snow-shoes from the well beaten path, and he had the vaguest

notion of how far forward the lifted foot intended to go, at every step. The others did not look around until a clatter of racquets and a grunt of disgust caused them to turn — and there was poor Dick in a heap. They lifted him and set him going again; but he was down again in ten minutes.

"Guess you don't walk so good as you eat," said Sam. "Here, you lemme tote you a bit." He unfastened his partner's snow-shoes and handed them to Joe; then he crouched in the trail in front of Dick and got him on his back. Sam was short and broad, and Dick was long — especially in the legs. Their progression suggested an ant carrying a spider. Dick's feet dragged in the snow beside the deep trail. So they went down the mountain-side, greatly to the delight of Joe Banks, who followed close, laughing shrilly. At the edge of the swamp, Sam let Dick slide to the ground. "Here, you," he said to Joe, "you tote 'im a bit if you t'ink it so darn funny."

"Oh, I can walk now," said Dick.

"I'll give ye a lift, mate," cried Joe. "Don't ye fret about me, for I was the strongest man, for'ard or aft, aboard the Sea Robin. Get up. That's the talk. Now we're off."

With Dick's knees gripped tightly under his arms and Dick's arms around his neck, he started along the trail at a trot. "What's your hurry?" asked Dick, holding hard. Joe did not reply in words, but chuckled and increased his pace. Sam and the panther also broke into a run. How Joe managed to keep his feet as long as he did was a wonder — and how Dick managed to stick to him was another wonder. Through snatching thickets of young spruce they plunged and over fallen logs and drifted brush they flew. They took the numerous kinks and corners of the trail at a gallop and the bumps and hollows with mad leaps. If Dick had felt stronger he might have enjoyed it; but feeling as he did he simply gripped tight with arms and legs, held his head low behind Joe's neck and shut his eyes. In this way, and at this mad pace, the thickets of the swamp were met and overcome. The edge of the lake was reached — and here Joe came down as if he had been shot and Dick went flying over his head and landed, sprawling, in six feet of drifted snow. He scrambled out in time to see the wild man doubling back into the woods. He shouted after him; but the mariner vanished, still going at top speed. "That beats the band," said Dick.

Sam appeared in a minute, and listened calmly to the news of Joe's sudden change of course. "Dat nothin' — for him," he said. "He jes' t'ink of somethin' he forget; or maybe he jes' change his mind quick. He be at shack a'right in time for dinner, yes, you bet."

As Bill the panther had also vanished, the partners went straight down the lake to the shack. Dick lay down in his bunk, thoroughly done but glad to be home again. Sam lit the fire and then produced the recovered black fox skin. This was the first Dick had heard of its return to light, and his spirits went up like a rocket. "Why, we are right as rain, after all," he cried. "We've had some jolly hard luck, I must say — but it looks as if good luck would just about set it straight. We'll clear a bit on our winter's work, won't we, Sam?"

"Pretty good, you bet," returned Sam. "You done better a'ready nor plenty ol' trappers I know. Dis good country — a'mighty good country. Guess we have one few dollars to spend when we strike de settlements, Dick."

Dick fell asleep with the precious skin in his hands. Sam got in a pile of wood, chopped out the hole in the lake and brought up water, and

then filled his pipe and sat down to wait until it was time to get dinner.

Neither Joe nor the panther turned up at the shack for dinner. Dick ate as much as Sam would give him — which was enough for two ordinary men but somewhat less than he wanted — and then returned to his bunk and slumber. Sam pottered about the vicinity of the shack all afternoon, airing the store of pelts in the wind and sunshine and chopping a little wood. He wondered what had kept Joe away from dinner, but felt sure that he would visit the shack in time for supper. Shortly after sunset he went in and mixed another batter for flap-jacks — but this time of corn-meal instead of flour. Provisions of this kind were very low; but he wanted to celebrate Dick's return to health and the shack in a manner that suited his own ideas of the fitness of things and was, at the same time, highly acceptable to Dick. The lantern was lit and half the flap-jacks were fried when there sounded a furtive knocking on the door. Sam opened it quickly, and after a moment's hesitation in stepped Joe Banks. The panther slunk in at his heels. Joe wore the bear skin over his shoulders and was grinning with even more abandon than usual.

"Where you bin? Why you don't come to dinner?" asked Sam.

"And why did you spill me over your head and then run away?" asked Dick.

"Well, mates, to tell 'e the honest truth, I remembered something," replied Joe. "It come to my mind that sudden I stopped runnin' too quick, an' fell down. Hope I didn't hurt ye none, lad."

"No, I am all right," Dick assured him. "But what was it you remembered so suddenly? It must have been very important to bring you to such a short stop."

"Not much. 'Twasn't much, after all," returned the wild man. He looked at Sam. "Did ye say something, one day, about fox skins — about fox skins ye lost?"

"Yes, black fox skin. You give him back," said Sam, letting one of the flap-jacks burn to a crisp in the pan.

Joe flung back his cloak of bear skin and produced a long, flat package from under his left arm. "If ye want these here, mates, ye kin have 'em," he said. "I had 'em tucked away in a hole in a tree — an' I'll eat my whiskers if I know where I got 'em!"

Sam snatched the package from his hands and threw aside the sheets of birch-bark in which it was folded. Three black fox skins! A sort of gasping grunt escaped the old trapper. He raised the skins close to his eyes, fingering them to see if they were real — or some foolish vision. Dick sprang from his bunk.

"But they are black fox!" he cried. "They are very valuable! You must not give them to us, Joe."

Joe laughed, long and loud. "Take 'em," he said. "I don't want 'em. Take 'em, mates, an' welcome. But ye may as well look to the galley fire, doctor. Something seems to be burning."

But Sam looked at Dick. "These all fresh skins — dis winter skins," he said. "We take 'em a'right, you bet. Dey come from our traps, I t'ink."

CHAPTER XXIV

SPRING. THE WAY OUT

DURING the remainder of the season the partners did not over-exert themselves at the work of trapping. With the skins of four black foxes, and with otter, mink, common fox, lynx, ermine, wolf and bear skins to the value of hundreds of dollars, they could well afford to spend the fag-end of the winter in whatever way appealed to them. They treated Joe Banks like a brother, and persuaded him to change his place of habitation from the den on the mountain to the shack. Each gave him articles of wearing apparel, and Sam made him several pairs of good moccasins. For days together Joe remained with them, grinning and talkative; and then, of a sudden, his black mood would come to him and drive him back to solitude and the mountain den.

Now came the season of close-gripped, equal struggle between winter and spring. For several hours every day the power of the sun, helped perhaps by a wind from the south or south-

east, would melt the surface of the deep snow that blanketed all that vast wilderness; and all night the power of the frost worked to repair what the sun had weakened. In this way the frosts and barrens and drifted lakes were encased in a tough crust that would carry a man, either with or without racquets, except for an hour or two at noon-day. So it was for several weeks; and this was the time chosen by Dick to explore the surrounding country — for exploration, not trapping, was his ambition. In these days of hard crusts and easy travelling he ranged the wilderness in every direction, sometimes accompanied by Sober Sam but more often by Joe Banks. He had learned something of map-making at school, and with his compass, note-book and pencils he mapped Two-Fox Pond and Wigwam Mountain, Smoky Pot and the head waters of Smoky River, the barrens, hills and forest for miles around and ten nameless lakes. His maps were rough but fairly accurate, and were supported by full and useful notes and some clever sketches of the animals and timber of the country. Months later, in the city of Quebec, he elaborated these maps, notes and sketches into a series of papers that were published in a Canadian maga-

zine. By these he won his first recognition as an explorer. But this has nothing to do with our present story.

At last the snow dwindled perceptibly, mild winds blew and rain fell. Sam chopped a hole through the weakened ice of the lake and, using pork fat for bait, caught plenty of big trout. He also cut notches in the trunks of several dozen of sugar maples and by means of wood " spiles " and vessels of birch-bark collected, day by day, a quantity of sweet sap. This was boiled down to syrup over a fire in the open, Joe's rusty kettle and the partners' two kettles being used as boiling-pots. A quantity of the syrup thus toilfully obtained was still further reduced, by more boiling, to sugar. During these busy days, the sun, the mild winds and mild rains were working swiftly and steadily. The wilderness was full of the soft sounds of their activities — now a dull cracking on the lake proclaimed the loosening of the ice along the shore, and now a dull thud, so soft in tone that the ear could not tell if it were far or near, gave news of the falling of an undermined snow-drift into a newly freed stream.

Now came a time when it was almost impossible to travel in the woods, for water and slush drained

down every slope and lay in pools on all the levels. Now the ice on Two-Fox Pond was grey as a slate; and the eager water beneath it, swelled by the drainage of the forests, arose one night, lifted it from its hold upon the shores, and broke it into a thousand great " pans." At the same time the river opened for a distance of about two miles below the lake, breaking free with gigantic strength and fury and piling the shores and the ice below with fragments of its prison. That night and the following day were filled with the voices of battling waters and rending and cracking ice.

Now Sober Sam brought his canoe from its shelter and resined the seams in the bark. Dick and Joe watched him; and for a little while Joe's face wore an expression of wistful longing as he gazed at the canoe, though he had already refused the partners' pressing offers to take him out to the settlements with them. Sam glanced up from his work and caught the look. " Guess you come 'long with us after all," he said. Joe shook his head and grinned. " There ye're wrong, mate," he said. " I'd like fine to go for a v'yage with the two o' ye; but I reckon as how the settlements ain't no place for me — for me an' Bill here. I know what the harbour-master an' sich-like

folk would do. They'd say I was crazy — yes, ye may lay to that! — an' they'd put me in a mad-house an' Bill here into a wild beast show. Aye, mates, that's what they'd do, sure as my name's Joe Banks, bosun."

Sam was silent, for Joe had struck the nail on the head, and no mistake. But Dick spoke up. "Perhaps the people in the settlements and town would think you crazy, Joe, but Sam and I know that you are sound as a bell. So don't you go back to that den when we leave. That is enough to make any man feel queer in the head. You and Bill must live here; and you can do a bit of trapping to put in the time. Sam showed you how to set the traps. And as I've taught you to shoot, here is my rifle and all the cartridges I have left. You'll find it an easier job to get moose and caribou with a rifle than with a knife."

"Dick, ye're a good lad, an' no mistake!" exclaimed Joe. "Now Bill an' me will live like kings." Then he frowned. "But what if I go an' hide it away somewhere I can't find it?" he asked mournfully. "I do queer things, ye know — an' I might do that."

"No danger," said Dick in a voice of forced conviction. "You need this rifle, it is more im-

portant than your knife — and you don't hide that away. Why, it would be like a crazy man to go and hide his rifle. You just put your mind to it, Joe. Remember that you need it. You are a trapper, now, and live in a good shack, and you can't get along without your rifle. And be careful of your cartridges, for you haven't a great many. Don't go shooting at everything you see. And don't shoot moose and caribou until the weather gets cold again — and don't set your traps until then, either."

"I've got that all straight," replied Joe, tapping his forehead with the tips of his long fingers. "But I reckon I won't trouble much with trappin'; for ye and Sam will be back afore next snow."

"But in case we don't get back," said Dick. "Just in case we don't."

"We come back, a'right," said Sam, staring at Dick across the upturned canoe. "Yes, Dick, you an' me come back afore the snow flies, you bet. Dis mighty fine country — dis black fox country. You a'mighty big fool, Dick, if you don't trap dis country nex' winter. Yes, dat right. You t'ink now you have plenty of this kinder life — too much snow, too much cold, too much sleep in bunk an' snow-shoe all day — but

pretty soon you get tired of sleeping in bed an' settin' on one chair, an' wearin' boots instead of moccasins. Yes, dat right. Den you t'ink of dis country an' dis shack, an' of old Sober Sam. Your money, it go, go, go — an' den remember all dis fine country an' de fox an' mink an' otter waitin' to get catched. Yes, I know. You get tired of potatoes an' pies an' fine city grub, an' den you want good big hunk of fried moose-meat, and some of old Sam's flap-jacks. Oh, yes, I know all dat. You begin to holler for your partner pretty soon — for Sober Sam an' his canoe. You t'ink of good traps left in dis shack, an' how you see wolves chase caribou an' you an' me chase wolves — an' you pack your blankets an' come back." He turned to Joe. "Yes, me an' Dick come back afore snow flies agin. So you keep shack good an' dry, an' traps also, an' we bring in plenty good grub and tobac."

Joe nodded; but Dick did not say anything or even look at the old Indian for several minutes. He felt that he had seen and suffered enough of the Two-Fox Pond country to last him for many years, and of late he had allowed himself to dream of exploration rather than trapping, and the hot jungles of the South instead of the white

vastnesses of the North. But perhaps the old trapper was right, after all; perhaps he knew more of the way Dick would feel in the near future than Dick did himself. Youth delights in change, even if in only a change of hardships and dangers; and Dick was young and Sober Sam was old. On the other hand (Dick continued to reflect), this was a country of good furs — and of black foxes. It was an unknown country, overlooked or forgotten by Indian and half-breed trappers. Another winter could be spent here to great advantage, from a financial point of view. And, after all, money was what he needed — golden keys with which to open the mysterious doors of the unexplored places of the earth.

Dick walked away from the canoe, stood for a while looking out across the dark surface of the swollen, ice-dotted lake, then turned and retraced his steps.

"You are right, Sam," he said. "I believe we'll come back and put in another winter together in this good fur country."

"Yes, you come a'right," returned Sam, "I come back pretty early, an' bring in little grub to Joe, an' go out agin and get you same time an' same place as last fall. You a'mighty

fine trapper, Dick. You want to come back to dis country soon as you get first sniff of frost in de air."

"We won't make any plans now," said Dick, smiling. "But I think you are right. I think I'll join you for one more winter."

The days slipped by, some bright and some cloudy but all warm with the breath of spring. The ice went out of the lake and out of the river — out of thousands of rivers, churning and crashing — and at last a few battered cakes of it drifted into salt water. Now all the snow was gone save where ghosts of the deepest drifts still lay in the darkest hollows of the forest. The canoe lay at the edge of the lake; the furs, done up in a compact bale with a moose hide laced tightly around it, lay on a dry log beside the canoe. And the partners, too, were ready. They had left half the sugar, a pound of tea, and two of the four remaining plugs of tobacco with Joe. Their provisions for the long journey consisted of a little tea, flour and salt, about forty pounds of smoked trout and moose-meat and a few pounds of maple sugar.

Sam lifted the canoe and slid it into the water; and while Dick held her steady by one gunnel he placed the pelts and provisions amidships, with

an axe on one side and a rifle on the other, frying-pan and kettle in convenient nooks, a paddle and spruce-pole in the bow and another pole in the stern, sticking far out behind like a cocked-up tail. He had another paddle in his hand.

" Now you get in, Dick," he said, steadying the canoe with the blade of his paddle. Dick stepped into the bow and knelt low, leaning against the bar behind him and the end of the bale of furs. Then Sam stepped into the stern and pushed off from the shore. Joe and Bill the panther stood on the top of the bank.

The partners turned.

" Good-bye, Joe. Take care of yourself," called Dick.

" I'll bring you plenty grub an' tobac," called Sam.

" Good-bye, mates. See ye later," replied Joe Banks, with his face still wreathed in its habitual grin.

The canoe slipped out and Sam dipped the paddle. Dick, with his face over his shoulder, watched Joe and the trail of smoke from the chimney of the shack until they were hidden by a spur of the forest. Then he faced forward and took up his paddle; but he could not banish Joe

and the panther from his thoughts. Poor old Joe alone in the wilderness again. And the memory of that good-humoured, innocent grin was pitiful.

"It is a blessing that he is cracked," he said.

Sam's thoughts had been with the wild man too.

"Oh, no," he said. "For if he wasn't cracked he'd be comin' out with us, Dick, an' maybe have a fling in the settlements. But he darn good feller, anyhow — an' dat Bill not so bad when you know 'im. It pretty near make me laugh to t'ink how scart you was of them two, Dick."

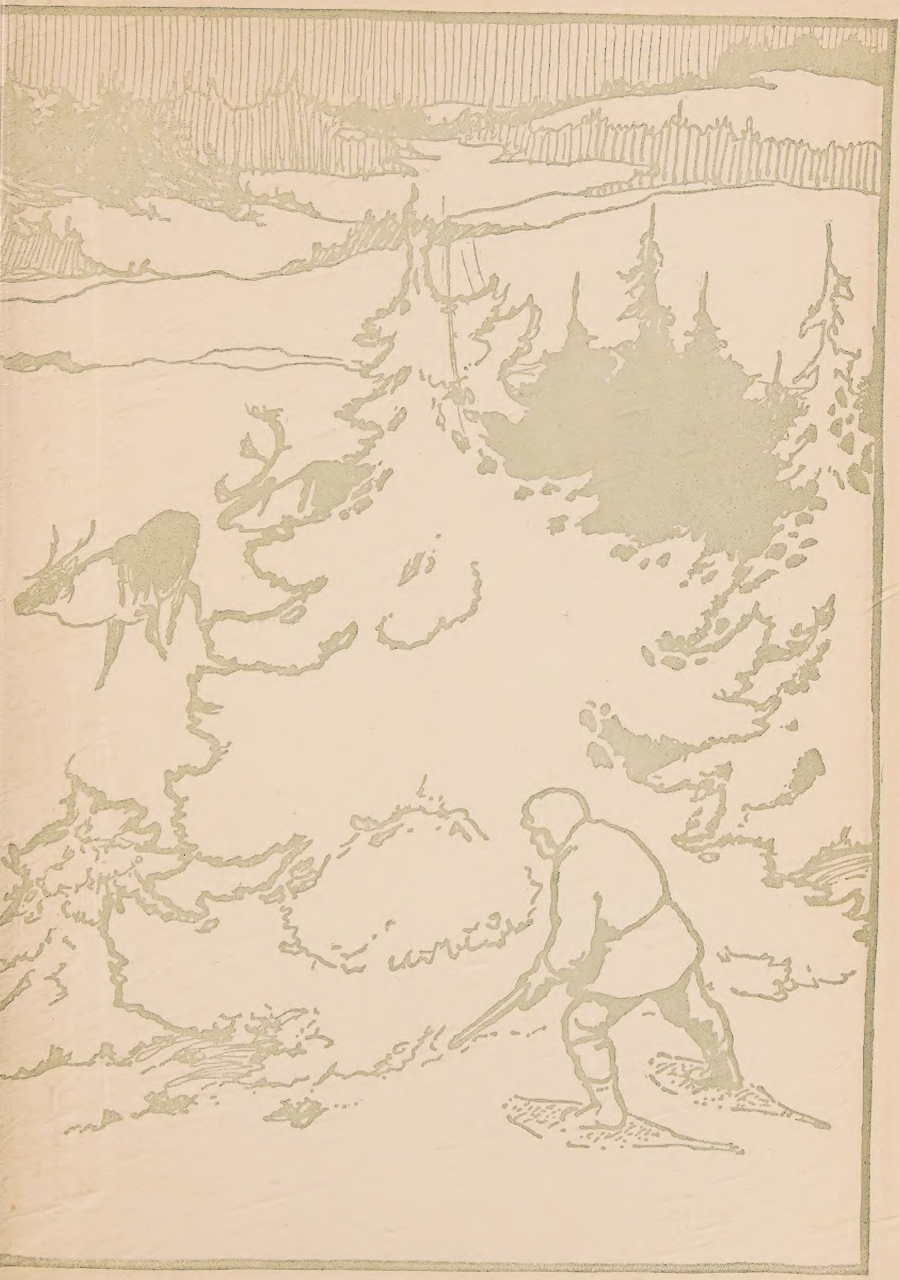
"Not so scared as you," returned Dick.

The swollen waters carried the canoe along, out of the lake and into the racing, muddy currents of the river. Sam kept the blade of his paddle down, steering without stroking. Dick drew his paddle from the water and leaned back, for there was no need of working. The moving sunlight flooded over the innumerable black spires and shaggy buttresses of the forest. A flock of geese flew over the canoe, high up, heading northward in quest of some quiet breeding place beyond the knowledge of man. They swept along in two diverging, swaying hives behind their leader, and the "cronk, cronk" of their crying beat down

to the re-awakened wilderness. Dick looked up and did not envy them their northward flight. It was better to be outbound from the desolate vastnesses of wood and water; better to be heading down stream, by racing reach and foaming rapid, toilsome portage and roaming fall, to the haunts of men. At Wolf's Landing there were letters from home awaiting him, and papers and magazines, and a bed with sheets — and perhaps (who knows) a bath-tub of sorts and plenty of hot water. There he would part with Sober Sam, and go by wagon and rail to the narrow streets and tall houses, and to the bustle and lights and comforts of the ancient city of Quebec. Oh, yes, it was a long journey between here and there — but civilization waited at the end of it.

"Yes, dat a'right," remarked Sam, suddenly. "You mighty glad you goin' out, Dick — but you be mighty glad when you an' me head up stream agin, nex' fall."

"How did you know what I was thinking about?" asked Dick.

"I know a'right. I feel dat way myself every spring," replied Sam.

THE END.